NOVEL
23
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Mushoku
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jobless reincarnation

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Mushoku Tensei
jobless reincarnation
23
WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote
ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka

Nanahoshi
Perugius
Soldat
Sara
DRAMATIS PERSONAE
Eris
Rudeus
Lucy
Sylphiette
Sieghart
Roxy

"So that this child may break out of his shell and grow strong, wise, and gentle, I bestow upon him the name..."
"Saladin."

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

23

WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na Magonote

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Shirotaka

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 23

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"Misfortune arises from the smallest of things."

—I don't need anything special to
find the blessings in my life.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
The Green-Haired Baby

Sylphiette

I HAD A DREAM once. It was around the time that Rudy went to the King Dragon Realm. In my dream, there was a child crying. A group of dark shadows surrounded her. They ganged up on the child and threw pitch-black lumps of *something* at her. The child desperately tried to run away, but the shadows would always follow.

The child ran toward a light. As she approached the light, it tossed balls of light at the shadows, and they dispersed. The light then gently enveloped the child as she drifted off to sleep.

When I first had that dream, I thought it was about the past. A dream about the old days when the village kids would bully me. I believed I was dreaming about it after all this time as a sign of how much I loved Rudy. That was all I thought of as I lay back down and wriggled happily, like a little girl.

Several months later, around the time when Rudy was off in the Demon Continent, I had another dream just like it. This time, it went differently.

The green-haired child was here. But instead of having my face, the child now had Rudy's. The green-haired child with Rudy's face was being chased by dark shadows. There was no light where the child was headed. I panicked and dashed up to the child, desperate to protect him from the shadows. Without my magic, I could only try and swat the shadows away with my bare hands. The shadows were tenacious. They refused to stay away. I could feel the child shuddering in my arms.

After this dream, I worried that some harm might have come to Rudy. Maybe he'd been injured or captured. No, of course not. He

had Eris and Roxy with him…

I thought long and hard about what to do to help, and in the end, I returned home that very day. It calmed my worries about my husband…but new worries sprung up in their place.

My tummy had grown round and big. What if that dream was about the child inside it?

I was fretting over nothing, I quickly told myself. There was no way that Rudy wouldn't protect our child. There had to be a light awaiting them. I convinced myself that the pregnancy nerves were just getting to me. I put the dream out of my mind.

Eventually, Rudy returned from the Demon Continent. I asked about a name for the baby. It had now been six months since he told me he'd "think one up." I could have waited for it until after I gave birth, but I said I wanted to know in advance in case he left soon on another trip.

"I'm sorry. I still haven't thought about the name."

That moment, the thought of that dream flitted across my mind. The vision of that child surrounded by dark shadows with nobody to help him. Then, a worse one: Did Rudy love this child?

Of course he did. I was sure of it. That night, however, I had the dream again. The shadows gathered around the child, who was far beyond my reach. I ran as fast as I could to help…but I didn't make it. When I reached the child, I found that the shadows had gone…and that the child was dead.

I woke up drenched in sweat. Just a dream. It was just pregnancy nerves. I wanted to believe that, but my mind kept racing. If the baby inherited my green hair…they'd almost certainly face discrimination because of it. The same way I had. While the most I ever had to deal with were neighborhood bullies, there was no guarantee that my child would be so fortunate. Something far, far worse could be waiting for them.

I knew Rudy would protect them whether they had green hair or not. Eris would do the same, and so would Roxy. My head told me they would, but my heart still worried.

It didn't take long to realize why.

I knew about the Laplace Factor. I knew why the color of my hair was green, and why Rudy had gotten a bit uneasy over the subject a while back.

What if the child I gave birth to turned out to be Laplace?

I wondered, *What would Rudy do?* It wasn't his priority now, but he was gathering forces to do battle with Laplace in eighty years. If my child really were Laplace, then, given what Rudy had done so far… Well, I couldn't help but wonder.

I believed in Rudy. I wouldn't doubt him for a second. But… what would he do? What would I *want* him to do? My mind spun over these thoughts for so long that I didn't get another wink of sleep that night.

I comforted myself with the fact that there was no way to know if the child's hair would be green. If their hair turned out to be any other color, we'd be fine.

It was green.

Rudeus

I NAMED THE BABY Sieghart. The names for my girls, Lucie and Lara, came from their mothers, while my son Arus was named after a famous hero in history. I decided to take inspiration from the invincible hero in my old world, Siegfried. I considered leaving it at just Siegfried, but Ranoa had a lot of names that went "[something]-hart," so I tagged that on at the last minute.

We'd call him "Sieg" for short.

Sieg seemed like a perfectly normal child. He did all the crying, sleeping, peeing, and pooping you'd expect. Well, given that Lara barely cried at all and Arus would bawl the second I held him, Sieg seemed plenty normal in comparison.

As for being a reincarnation of a certain someone… Well, there's no reason to be vague. I mean Laplace. And no, Sieg didn't look like him.

"Not as far as I can tell, anyway," I told myself. "Seriously, though. What's going on with my kid?"

Three days had already passed since Arumanfi appeared and told me about the summons from Perugius. Right now, it was the middle of the night. Sitting across from me was Orsted. Between us lay Sieg, who snoozed peacefully in his cradle; he'd been crying until just a moment ago, but now he was fast asleep. Orsted seemed a bit tuckered out himself.

Eris was standing behind Orsted. Showing far more caution than necessary, she held a hand on the sword hanging from her waist.

"Hmph. Did you not understand me the first time?"

"Oh, no! Of course, I *absolutely* understand, and I believe you! Laplace hasn't been born yet, so our child can't be Laplace! Right, absolutely! I understand full well!"

"…"

"But, you know, you said it before, no? Now that Pax is dead, you don't know how Laplace would be born anymore. Meaning! Maybe my presence threw a wrench in everything. Maybe Laplace will appear earlier, or maybe it's the Man-God's interference… And that, well, maybe that'd make it *possible*…"

I shrank into my seat as my begging continued. Orsted simply sighed; he looked exasperated at having to explain things *again*.

"Pax's death means that I no longer know where Laplace will be born…but the Laplace Factors have yet to be fully gathered. It

could happen in about fifty years' time, but Laplace wouldn't be born *now*. Not under any circumstances."

I didn't recall hearing about the factors needing to be "gathered"…but for now, if I believed him…

"Then what is my child?"

"Simply your darling infant son," Orsted said while offering a hand out to Sieg. He pulled it back, however, after hearing the clink of Eris's sword being flicked up from its sheath. C'mon, Eris, you could let the guy pat the baby's head. No need to be a helicopter parent.

"So, what about the green hair?" I asked. Sieg's hair was green. It was a similar shade to what Sylphie's once was. The hair was still thin and fluffy on account of Sieg being a baby, but it was definitely green.

"It's simply green. It could be due to the Laplace Factor, or it could be mere genetics, but there's nothing more to it than that."

So…just a green baby, huh?

"This child is not Laplace," Orsted continued. "That I can assure you."

"Got it… Thank you."

I thanked him, but I still had room for doubt. Orsted wasn't infallible. It might not have happened in prior loops, but this loop had proven that there was a first time for everything. Orsted had made his share of miscalculations already. That was why I couldn't shake the possibility of Perugius examining Sieg, concluding he was Laplace, and deciding to kill him on the spot. That, or the possibility of Perugius making a mistake.

There were no guarantees when it came to how people could act. Even legendary heroes messed up sometimes.

"If you wouldn't mind," I asked, "could you perhaps come with us when we go to Lord Perugius's castle? And maybe protect us if he says that Sieg is Laplace?"

“Hmm… Very well,” Orsted said with yet another sigh. He was irritated that the jackass he was trying to talk some sense into would propose something this pointless.

I mean, to be clear, I knew asking Orsted to tag along to calm my own frayed nerves was out of line. Okay? As they say, to err is human. On the other hand, Perugius would know to be careful if I had Orsted backing me up. You don’t wanna mess with me if you know what’s good for ya, punk!

Anyway, that settled that. For now, at least.

“…”

“Quite the glum look. What, you’re *still* worried about something?”

“Well, a bit…”

Ever since the birth, Sylphie was dejected. Nothing about how she acted changed, but she hung her head a little more often. Maybe she felt responsible for Seig’s green hair.

Nobody in the family blamed her. The most I saw was Roxy giving Sylphie some counseling. But Sylphie’s gloom persisted. I tried to strike up a conversation with her plenty of times myself, but I had no idea how to bring her smile back.

“But that’s a family matter,” I admitted.

“I see. So, when will we be leaving to see Perugius?”

“We’ll go once Sylphie’s recovered a bit more.”

I told Arumanfi to wait. That we couldn’t go immediately after my child had been born. Arumanfi said he understood and left without another word, but Perugius was probably getting impatient. He didn’t waste any time in sending a messenger, after all…

Orsted said that my son wasn’t Laplace, but Perugius wouldn’t be satisfied by our word alone. He’d want to see for himself to be sure.

It wasn't going to be easy, but I'd have Sylphie come with us. I had a feeling that it'd be for the best.

***

Twenty days passed.

For now, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with our child. He seemed perfectly healthy, if anything.

Sylphie, on the other hand… While her health had recovered, her mood hadn't. She constantly had a glum look on her face. But during the day, she would hold the baby tightly in her arms. I saw many flashes of determination in her eyes as she did, as though to declare that she wouldn't hand this child over to anyone.

"Sylphie, I think we should let Lord Perugius look at Sieg," I suggested to her. Sylphie looked stunned, holding Sieg even closer.

"I don't want to…"

She pouted weakly in response, sounding as though she'd regressed to her childhood. The look on her face reverted as well, but not to one she'd ever shown to me. This must be the face she'd shown to her bullies.

"Why… Why would you say that?" Sylphie asked.

"Because we need Lord Perugius to understand that our child isn't Laplace."

Sylphie hung her head.

"But… If he *is* Laplace, what then?"

"Huh? I already told you, Orsted said he isn't Laplace…"

"But he could've made a mistake…"

Orsted wasn't perfect. He could have been blinded by Sieg's cuteness and claimed that he wasn't Laplace despite all the signs being there. *Not that I think he'd do that…*

“If that happens…”

“Then?”

“Then I’ll protect Sieg, even if I have to bring the floating fortress crashing down to do it.”

Sylphie hung her head at this answer, too. Her voice lowered to a murmur as she said “Okay.”

***

We set off for the floating fortress. Our group consisted of me, Sylphie, and our baby Sieg in her arms, in addition to Eris, Orsted, and Zanoba. I brought Zanoba because I figured it couldn’t hurt to have more people who Perugius couldn’t ignore.

“Greetings, come right in.”

Sylvaril’s response to our sizable party was the same as ever. The show of heartfelt respect to Zanoba, Eris, and Sylphie. The show of superficial respect to me. The attitude of downright disgust at Orsted. Yep, same as ever.

I felt that she should really learn to make her opinions of others a *bit* less obvious…but had I said that out loud, she probably would’ve snapped at me and said that the floating fortress Chaos Breaker wasn’t in the business of customer service.

“Now then, this way. Lord Perugius awaits.”

She guided us along the usual route to the audience chamber. There was no conversation.

Sylphie walked alongside me, treading lifelessly as she clutched Sieg. To the other side of me walked Eris, who rested her hand on her sword’s hilt, ready to defend Sylphie at a moment’s notice. Zanoba walked behind me. He’d been told of the circumstances and looked mildly anxious as a result. Orsted walked with Zanoba and wore a helmet to keep his face hidden.

Our party passed beneath the gate that Zanoba once breathlessly praised. Illusory beads of white light suddenly emanated from Sylphie and Sieg; they were probably coming out of me as well. The only thing I thought strange was that no such beads rose from Orsted; maybe he didn't have that Laplace Factor thing?

"…"

Sylvaril looked our way but stayed silent. She swiftly led us inside. I took her lack of reaction as a sign.

"You see, Sylphie?" I assured her. "It's gonna be no big deal."

"Okay…"

No reaction was far from proof. Sylphie had hardly reacted, either.

Sylvaril continued walking without looking back at us. We passed through halls lined with luxurious decor until we found ourselves standing before a grand, tastefully designed door. Maybe seeing castles all around the world had changed my perspective… I was starting to understand why Zanoba had such glowing praise for this castle back then. Saying any of that out loud here would probably come off as brownnosing, though.

Sylvaril opened that grand door.

"Enter, if you'd please."

At Sylvaril's request, we entered the audience chamber. It was unchanged from when I saw it last. The pillars as wide as tree trunks, the giant chandeliers, the curtains emblazoned with the emblems of humanity and dragonfolk, and the twelve masked men and women standing on both sides of the red velvet carpet. Sitting on the throne was the silver-haired Dragon King.

The aesthetics of this place might be described as grand, glorious, or even divine. You could search the world over for an audience chamber that inspired half as much awe and never come close. The addition of Sylvaril would be the final piece in the puz— wait, was there someone extra here? Ah, Nanahoshi was mixed in.

What was she doing here? Did she have a side gig as one of the spirit aides?

“Rudeus. You’ve arrived.”

“I have. It’s been some time, Lord Perugius.”

I bowed my head but remained standing. Sylphie, Eris, and Zanoba all took a knee. I normally would have kneeled as well, but I’d recently learned that, as Orsted’s subordinate, I shouldn’t be so quick to kneel before others.

I checked their reactions to be sure; Sylvaril seemed a bit ticked off, but Perugius didn’t say anything about it. I couldn’t attribute this to his mood, however, which was foul.

“You certainly kept me waiting.”

“Well… My son had just been born.”

“I’ve heard as much from Arumanfi, hence my willingness to wait. I wouldn’t be so forgiving had your reason been any more trifling than that.”

He might dismiss the birth of a child as “trifling,” but he wouldn’t castigate me over my choice. Truly a magnanimous monarch. He kept anxiously tapping on the dragon-shaped armrests of his throne.

“I take it from the look on your face that you know why I called you here.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And I take it from your party that you’re prepared to fight depending on how this conversation goes. Some commendable resolve.”

“Yes… I am.”

Perugius glared bitterly at Orsted. I couldn’t see Orsted’s expression from beneath the black helmet, but I could guess that it was as intimidating as ever. Good ol’ reliable Orsted.

“However, Lord Perugius, I believe it won’t come to that.”

“Well, now! It won’t lead to a fight, you say? I see, so you have that much confidence in your position!”

“We don’t have any reason to fight. Now, then… Sylphie?”

I had Sylphie stand and show Perugius the baby she carried.

“Lay your eyes upon my fourth child.”

“Hmm… Well? What of it?”

“Well, everything. Were you not the one who requested I bring the child born between Sylphie and me, Lord Perugius?”

Perugius stopped moving. His irritated tapping on the armrest stopped too. I continued regardless.

“I had Orsted look at him as well, and we can confirm that this child is not Laplace. However, I presumed that you wouldn’t be satisfied unless you saw him with your own two eyes. I considered declining to show him to you, but to maintain our amicable relationship, I decided it best to allow it.”

“…”

Perugius remained silent.

“However, if Orsted was perhaps wrong, and if this child really is Laplace…”

“Well? What then?”

“Then I’ll fight.”

Perugius’s eyebrow twitched.

“Have you not been traveling the world for the sole purpose of defeating Laplace in battle eighty years from now?”

“I have.”

“Yet you would fight to *defend* that very same Laplace?”

Now that he mentioned it, I was contradicting myself. I would protect this child, despite knowing he was Laplace. It would completely waste everything I’d spend these past few years doing.

“If my child grows up, and if he truly does bring about a war against all of humanity…then I’ll respond the way we’ve been preparing for all this time.”

“You wouldn’t consider nipping this problem in the bud?”

“I…would not.”

If my son were Laplace… A terrifying thought. I avoided thinking too deeply about it. In eighty years, Laplace would start a war. In response, I was negotiating with countries around the world to help ease Orsted’s burden. If Laplace were to appear right this moment, I’d probably fight in the war myself.

Stop for a moment and think it through. If a war never broke out, what then? If Laplace were to regain his senses and swear off of war, what then? Let’s say Laplace had just been born; there should be plenty of time to make him see reason. His schooling could make a difference. If we taught Laplace about everything that happened and everything that would come to pass, he might even become Orsted’s ally…

No. Orsted was clear; Laplace had to be killed. He must obtain the treasure of the dragonfolk. Which meant that the day would come where Orsted took my child’s life… Damn. No other conclusion.

Hold on, Rudeus. Caaalm down. If I took each thought one step at a time, I could find the path I wanted to take.

“My family will always come first in my priorities. I became a subordinate of Orsted’s because there were forces at work to harm them. If Orsted were planning to harm my family, then he’d have to do so over my dead body.”

“Even if the cause were your own son?”

“My plan…is to thoroughly teach him the difference between right and wrong. My children may be young, but while they’re still children—that is, until they turn fifteen—I will protect them. If they

were to turn away from my advice after that, then I'd own up to my responsibility and deal with them."

"Well, now. 'Deal with them,' you say. Might I ask how?"

"I'll…teach them again. As best as I can."

As best as I could. For what I couldn't, well, being a child would be no excuse… Or, wait…

"So… You won't say you'd *kill* them."

"Everyone makes mistakes, so I'd like to give my children a second chance."

That was the most I could say. I didn't want to put anything beyond that into words. I didn't want to think about a future in which Lucie, Lara, or Arus made enemies of Orsted and were ruthlessly killed.

But however lofty my lessons might be, there were times when that just wouldn't be enough. Children rarely grow the way their parents plan. Heck, my own life barely went the way *I* planned it. They might have been my children, but I couldn't expect them to live up to every hope I had for them. They were their own people. That's why I wanted to give them a chance, if nothing else. A compromise.

"I have no children. As such, I fail to understand these ideas of yours. Ideas of allowing the seed of misfortune to grow only to weed it out yourself." Perugius laughed at his observation.

"But you, you're a foolish enough man to pick a fight with death for the sake of protecting your wives. Of course I wouldn't understand. I can't understand…but I can tell how strong your conviction is."

Perugius descended from his throne and slowly walked toward us. He soon stood right in front of me, with his height demanding that I tilt my head upward.

"In light of this, I shall grant you a chance and a trial."

"What do you mean?"

“Take your baby and travel to the shrine upon Aluce Hill, so that he may be baptized.”

“Aluce Hill?”

It was a landmark I’d never heard of. I looked around; almost everyone was tilting their heads in befuddlement. Orsted wasn’t, but I couldn’t make out his expression from under the helmet, either. Not that I thought that name was news to *him*, of course.

“Will that do, Nanahoshi?” asked Perugius while I was still processing the previous command. Curious as to why Nanahoshi’s name would come up here, I looked her way.

“I still haven’t wrapped my head around all of this…but I owe Rudeus a lot, so I’ll be fine.”

Nanahoshi sighed as she responded, like she was kinda let down. Maybe she had some other business here? She would need a good reason to stand among the familiars.

Sorry, but I had to steal the spotlight here. Family came first.

“Lord Perugius, where is this Aluce Hill?”

“Look for it yourself…is what I’d like to say, but I shall tell you. It’s hardly worth keeping secret when Orsted surely knows.”

“Ah, right. My apologies, but I appreciate the effort.”

In a clear, booming voice, he uttered the name of the one continent I had yet to set foot on.

“The Divine Continent.”

Chapter 2:
Path to the Divine Continent

THE DIVINE CONTINENT.

If you were to mark it on a map, it'd be on the northernmost edge, connecting the Central Continent to the Demon Continent. While it *is* called a continent, its land is adjoined to the Central Continent. You could even walk from it to the Demon Continent during the low tide.

Why would this landmass be treated as separate from both the Central and Demon Continents? Its height. This continent perched atop a steep, vertical precipice about three thousand meters above sea level.

People did not travel through it as a rule. It wasn't *impossible* for those determined enough, but there were no roads worth mentioning. Given the winged monsters teeming within the walls of that cliff, any attempts at scaling it would be incredibly difficult. I'd heard stories about wanted fugitives from the Central Continent traveling through the Divine Continent in the hopes of reaching the Demon Continent and escaping their bounty hunters. I hadn't heard any stories about them surviving the attempt.

You'd think being able to fly would make being a fugitive easy, but in this world, the sky belonged to the dragons. Forget planes; this world's technology hadn't even developed hot air balloons. It was the height of recklessness for someone to go into the air unprotected.

And *this* was the place Perugius wanted me to bring a month-old baby? Absurd.

"I'd appreciate it if you could inform me of where I could find a teleportation circle linked to this Divine Continent."

We were back at my company's countryside office. Eris was right behind me. Roxy and Sylphie were with Sieg in a different

room. It didn't seem like we'd be fighting Perugius at the moment, so I had Zanoba return home.

"…"

Orsted's expression was as fearsome as ever, but behind that fearsome face, he seemed to be considering how to tell me a hard truth. Maybe there *wasn't* a teleportation circle connected to the Divine Continent?

"Perugius wouldn't be satisfied if you used a teleportation circle."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Come to think of it, Perugius *did* call it a "trial." Perhaps giving Sieg a baptism at Aluce Hill on the Divine Continent wasn't the only part of the trial; the perilous path toward reaching it might be important. If that meant going from here all the way to the Divine Continent on foot, we'd be wasting a lot of time.

"Does that rule out teleporting to somewhere *near* the Divine Continent?"

"It shouldn't be a problem if you're still outside of it."

So, bring the baby to the foot of the Divine Continent, do some rock climbing, and get him baptized by the people living at the top. A three-course meal of tribulations. Forget the difficulty of the trek by itself, this was a one-month-old baby we'd be traveling with. He could get sick at any point along the way. At three thousand feet above sea level, altitude sickness could be a real possibility…

Yeah, this would be rough. Guess that's what made it a trial, though.

"Hmm…"

You know, maybe bringing the floating fortress crashing down wasn't such a bad idea.

"Orsted, do you think I can complete this trial? With a one-month-old baby with me, that is."

“Sure.”

“Your reasoning?”

“Sieghart, was it? That baby’s physique shows strong influence from the Laplace Factor. Children like that have a resistance to typical illnesses and environmental stresses.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It’s an effect they wove into the reincarnation magic to make sure that Laplace’s future body would survive the harshest conditions. If a child has a strong Factor, they can survive the trip to the Divine Continent.”

All right. If Orsted was that confident, then I guess Sieg would be fine. You know, as long as I didn’t totally space out and let a roc swipe Sieg off my back and carry him away in its talons. Eris and Roxy should be coming with me, so they’d make up for any lapses in attention I could have.

“I feel a bit guilty about asking so much. Especially right after what happened with Geese…”

“I understand.”

“I appreciate the generosity…”

“I still remember how you wiped a forest off the face of the continent to protect your family. I wouldn’t put it past you to bring Chaos Breaker crashing down before Laplace’s revival. That’s an asset, and I will need it.”

Figures. To Orsted, both Perugius and I were combat assets. He didn’t want his pieces taking one another out.

“I’m relieved to see you being so accommodating. We’ll get into preparations right away.”

“Sure.”

With our goal made clear, I looked behind me. Eris was there, with her arms crossed like usual.

“Is that all right with you, Eris?”

“Makes no difference to me,” said Eris. She then shot me a look that I hadn’t seen much of lately: a piercing glare. “Don’t you think you should discuss it with Sylphie?”

I couldn’t help but smirk, as it wasn’t something I expected to hear from Eris, but the nod I gave her was sincere.

“U…understood.”

Sylphiette

I WAS AT A LOSS. I didn’t know who to ask what to do or how. I didn’t even know what I wanted to come of it. It was painful to be so clueless.

When Rudy told me that he’d show Sieg to Perugius, I thought for just a moment about how much easier it would be if Perugius would simply take Sieg away. The thought shook me to my core.

It was just a fleeting thought, but it confirmed something—the root of my anxieties *wasn’t* the idea of Sieg being Laplace. But that begged the question: What was it I feared? Why was I uneasy? I didn’t know. All I could do was hold Sieg in my arms and shudder.

Even when we were told to go to the Divine Continent and give him a baptism, my mind was blank. It really was like I’d reverted to my old self—to the little girl who was bullied by all the kids in Buena Village. Rudy saved me back then; he chased off the bullies and taught me all there was to know. Things like magic, and how to read and write. What about now? Would Rudy still save me?

When I was a foolish little child, I had complete faith in Rudy and knew he would save me. Things were different now. I loved Rudy, and I had faith in him. But I knew he was still only human. He might have looked infallible, like he could do anything, but the truth was plenty of things were beyond him. He was scared of all kinds of

things, of course, and he was more than capable of making simple mistakes.

Like forgetting to come up with a name for our baby. That surprised me, and even disappointed me, but it wasn't like I got angry over it. Rudy was hard at work as Orsted's subordinate. I knew how busy every single day was for him. I knew that he faced hardship in the Asura Kingdom, in Millis, on the Demon Continent. Everywhere he went.

People had their limits. I wanted to be considerate of that. I couldn't expect someone to be a perfect family man while working under Orsted. That was why I swore to myself that I'd do it, so that Rudy could be free to pursue his work. I mustn't beg Rudy for help. I had to make ends meet on my own.

Rudy wouldn't come to save me. So, what was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to make it all work?

"Sylphie."

While my head spun from the onslaught of questions that had no answer, I heard a voice. I was instantly snapped back to reality, catching the person who'd spoken my name in the corner of my eye.

It was Roxy.

"Um… Sorry if I've got the wrong idea," Roxy began, asking with both hesitation and sincerity. "But… Sylphie, do you think that maybe you're less concerned about whether Sieg is Laplace, and more worried about how his hair is green?"

By the time I realized it, my eyes met Roxy's. Mine must have widened.

"What…makes you say that?"

"I heard from Lilia that you used to be bullied by other children for having green hair."

Oh, right. Lilia! I wondered why I'd forgotten about her. A long time had passed since my hair changed colors; I reunited with Rudy, married him, and at some point, I'd started assuming Rudy was the only one around who still knew about the old me. Silly me, Lilia knew as well. I never gave it too much thought, but there was no way she *wouldn't* have known.

Why didn't I ever connect with her? No, Lilia *did* start conversations with me. I had just closed myself off and never tried to ask her.

"You probably don't remember, Sylphie, but back when I was in Buena Village, I met you once. I even spoke to your parents."

"About…what?"

"About the color of your hair. It seemed they worried about it, too."

Huh. This was, well, a strange thing to hear.

For as long as I could remember, my mother and father never said a word about my hair color. Even when I got bullied and ran home crying and asked them why my hair was a different color from everyone else's, they couldn't give me a straight answer; they just looked sad, or guilty, or some other mix of emotions, and then they hugged me and told me it was all right, but it wasn't all right at all—

"What did you tell them?"

"That I could guarantee you weren't a Superd. I told them that everything would be all right if they explained it to their neighbors and raised you with love."

Ah. So that was why my mother and father hugged me and told me that it was all right, over and over again.

Of course, they weren't all talk; I knew that my mother and father really did love me. They raised me as best they could. I might not have known it then, but I knew now.

"I thought you'd be all right since Buena Village didn't have a culture of discriminating against demons, but that attitude doesn't

always reach the children…”

Roxy paused to pat my chest.

“Either way, if you have any concern about Sieg being treated differently because of his hair color, just leave it to me. As you can see from looking at me, I’m very clearly a demon. I’ve got plenty of experience with handling discrimination!”

Hearing this from Roxy made her seem more reliable than ever. Rudy must have had a lot of respect for that side of her…

Still… Yeah, she was right. I wasn’t alone anymore. I had Lilia and Roxy. Raising children might not have been Eris’s specialty, but she gave it her all without giving up or pushing it on to someone else.

“Let’s all travel to the Divine Continent together. I’m a bit concerned about leaving Lilia alone to watch the house, but there are plenty of people she can rely on.”

After making her suggestion, Roxy gently rubbed my back. I felt lighter, as if she was lifting a weight off my shoulders.

Rudeus

WHEN I RETURNED from my discussion with Orsted, I found Sylphie’s attitude had changed a bit. She was no more talkative than before, but the light had returned to her eyes. Roxy looked even more determined than usual, so I wondered if she gave Sylphie a pep talk. Man, Roxy was reliable.

I talked a bit with Sylphie, too. I told her Orsted said that Sieg’s health was strong enough to withstand the trip, and that I’d do everything in my power to protect him. I also put in one last apology for forgetting to name him. Her response to that was tepid, so it didn’t seem like she’d forgiven me yet.

I considered telling her that she could rest at home instead of coming along for the trip, but I decided against it. It'd be a huge shock if I had suggested separating mother and child. We'd go on this trip together. She wasn't fully recovered from giving birth, but I knew it was better this way.

Roxy and Sylphie were traveling to the Divine Continent with us for sure. I figured Eris was a given as well. That left the house with just Aisha, Lilia, Zenith, and the children. Arus and Lara were still small, but they were already a handful.

I unloaded my anxieties about it once I returned home, to which Lilia responded with a heartening, "We'll be fine." Aisha was more practical, saying, "We'll borrow some hands from the Mercenary Band if we need to, so don't worry about it." It sounded like they could make it all work, so for now, I relaxed.

We dedicated three days to preparing for the journey.

On the first day, we confirmed our route and schedule with Orsted, learned about the peculiarities of the Divine Continent, put in our orders for equipment, and a few other things. Fortunately, the office was already connected to a series of ancient teleportation circles around the world.

Our plan for the first day was to travel to an ancient circle from the office, soar from the ancient circle to the foot of the Divine Continent, and then scale the cliff face. Once that was cleared, traveling for around a half day to a full day would land us in Aluce.

Aluce was the name of a skyfolk town, with Aluce Hill referring to a hill nearby. After staying a night in the town, we would climb the nearby Aluce Hill and have Sieg receive his baptism. After that, all we'd have to do is set up a teleportation circle somewhere and head home.

At minimum, it'd take three to four days. With some leeway, I'd put it at around six.

Since we'd be climbing to a high altitude, we might need safety gear. The human body wasn't well adapted to survival in low-oxygen

areas. After I brought it up with Orsted, he provided a solution immediately.

Orsted handed me a few necklace-shaped magical implements. Apparently, they'd nullify the harmful effects of thin air. They were originally invented by a race that traversed the miasma-filled valleys of the Demon Continent, so their primary effect was to nullify bodily harm that came from highly toxic areas. It seemed like they'd work for our climb to the Divine Continent as well.

Man, Orsted could really pull anything out of that pocket of his. He might've secretly been a robot cat from the 22nd century. Nah, Orsted's face was too scary for kids' merch…

Two days before our departure, Lucie became depressed. When I asked her why, she said all her moms were going away and that she already felt lonely.

She hadn't been getting much attention lately, given Sylphie's emotional state. I guess this was only natural. I felt guilty over making a child pay the price for her parents' problems, but parents were human too. We get depressed sometimes.

For the rest of the day, I spent as much time with Lucie as I could afford. She talked about how dealing with the newly born Sieg was a bit tough. I couldn't tell her to be a big sister and suck it up at her age, and I certainly didn't want to, but I explained that the other kids would have tough times of their own. I hoped I could count on Lucie's help when those times came. I also said that if she ever needed help, her dear ol' dad would do everything he could to provide it.

Lucie pouted at the first half, but she looked like she was fully invested by the end. I'd like to think I reached her.

That evening, I caught Lucie tending to Sieg from the side of the crib he slept in. Considering how often she just stared blankly at him early on, this took me by surprise. I'd figured she must wish he wasn't here. And yet, she fetched Lilia or Aisha whenever Sieg

started crying, and if Lara or Arus got cranky, she'd dash over to comfort them. She'd taken my words to heart.

When I was her age… I mean, my previous life, of course. Back then, I could never have acted the way she was now. I probably made a fuss over how unfair it was that my siblings got all the attention and gave my parents a headache.

Lucie was still young, but she amazed me.

Before I knew it, it was the day of our departure.

Me, Eris, Roxy, Sylphie, and baby Sieg. The four parents of the family would all be on this journey. I was surprised we hadn't traveled together already. Well, I suppose it wasn't our first trip; we all went to see Ariel's coronation together. Anyway, while I knew it was a bit insensitive to Sylphie and Sieg, I felt a little excited.

"Well, we'll be off, now," I said.

"Gotcha!"

"Take care, now."

"Um… See you later."

Lilia and Aisha nodded as usual. Only Lucie looked the slightest bit reluctant as she held on to Aisha's hand. She was doing her best to not let that emotion show on her face.

I really ought to spend a bit more time with her once the situation with Geese settled down.

***

A few hours after our departure, we arrived at the Divine Continent's border. We were on the furthest northeastern edge of the Central Continent.

A vertical precipice that we strained to see the top of towered in front and over us. On either side, the ocean stretched into the distance.

The cliff face was more than simple bare rock. A number of the local inhabitants believed that gods resided within this cliff, so its surface was dotted with ladders and footholds. According to Orsted, a shrine dedicated to the worship of these gods could be found around two hundred meters up.

Further above that, there were stakes driven into the cliff face to assist with climbing. They'd been installed by someone who'd tried to climb the precipice long ago. It wasn't clear whether he ever made it all the way in one piece, but most opined that he fell without reaching the top.

There was a road on the right. Calling it a road was a bit generous, as it wasn't much more than the remains of a barely walkable series of footholds…but hey, if *someone* walked on it, then it counted as a road. It was patchy, but it continued all the way to the Demon Continent. While it was no doubt a harrowing path, it was apparently a safer bet than trying to climb upward. Quite a few people had traversed it from here to the Demon Continent and vice versa.

"That…sure is high!" said Eris as she looked up at the precipice. There was a hint of excitement in her voice; her arms were crossed, as though declaring that this was no obstacle to a first-rate

adventurer. She might have had the bravado of a port-town kid trying to live up to his ancestors, but sadly, this was the end of the Central Continent, not the End of the World.

"…"

Sylphie had a look of incredible unease. Given her current mental state and a fear of heights, I couldn't blame her.

"Um, Rudy?" asked Roxy in a shaky voice as she looked up at the precipice. "How are we going to climb this?"

Her voice seemed to plead for me to have a plan. Which, of course, I did. Come now, would I really go rock climbing with a newborn baby without a plan?

"This way, everyone," I said, leading the group toward a part of the wall that was relatively bare of footholds. Not that the presence of footholds would make a difference, but I didn't want to make life harder for any travelers coming after me.

First, I used earth magic to create a box that could hold about four adults with plenty of breathing space. One that was heavy but sturdy. I then added an entrance, as well as some windows to let some light in and let us check our surroundings.

"All aboard."

Once I confirmed that everyone was inside, I closed the door.

"The heck is this?" asked Eris, who tilted her head and looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"Now, now, let the master do his work," I assured her. I placed a hand on the ground. The spell I'd readied was called Stone Pillar. I formed four pillars, fixed them firmly to the box, and pumped in some mana.

"Eep!"

The box slowly started moving. Upward.

"Oh! Well, this does seem like a safe way to do it."

I felt a smug grin coming on at Roxy's praise. This was an original spell of mine, Elevator. I used it once before, back on the Begaritt Continent.

I'd put even more thought into passenger safety since then. The pillars lifting the box up were kept sturdy with plenty of mana, ensuring they wouldn't break on us. Creating pillars that could withstand the trip to three thousand meters required a massive amount of mana, so I did a baton pass every fifty meters by creating new pillars. I figured we'd be fine, but in case I got tired or ran low on mana on the way up, I could also make a hole in the cliff face and slot the entire box inside it, giving me a way to safely take a breather.

"…"

Sylphie glanced out the window while holding Sieg; a moment later, her face went completely pale. She walked over to me and plopped down by my side. Given how complicated things had gotten in the past few weeks, it warmed my heart to see she still relied on me.

"Man… Talk about *boring*," said Eris, who had also sat down—but only because she'd grown bored of the view out the window.

"It's better this way. We can't go rock climbing with a baby on board, right?"

"Hmph!"

Eris turned up her nose. I took the fact that she didn't hit me as a sign that she completely understood. I wouldn't let myself hurt those two on this journey. Not a scratch. No amount of heroism was gonna make up for forgetting to name Sieg, though.

***

Several hours passed. My plan of swapping out the pillars every fifty meters was making our ascent go without a hitch.

Sylphie kept her eyes on Sieg the whole time. Roxy tried to lighten the mood with a little light conversation. Sylphie wasn't her usual self, but she managed to respond. It was small talk; Roxy's grumblings about her work, the latest happenings at school, the last prank Lucie pulled on her, asking about how Arus and Lara were doing. That sort of thing. I would've liked to join in, but those pillars weren't exactly gonna form themselves, so I was stuck with that.

As for Eris, she took position by the window and gazed outside. The scenery was lovely. As the ground steadily slipped away, we got a better view of the flocks of giant creatures flying between the gaps of the clouds. Were those Blue Dragons? I'd never seen Blue Dragons up close…

By the time I replaced the pillars for the twentieth time and put us above the thousand-meter mark, avian monsters started to come into view. They were giant birds—probably around three meters long, with a wingspan exceeding six meters. They were also flying around our box and squawking at us. Their flock circled us, perched above us, pecked at the walls. Generally harassed us. Hard to tell if they were scared of this new object, or territorial and trying to destroy it.

Our box was built to be incredibly tough. It wouldn't break from a few monsters' pokes. It did sway a little, though. Each time it did, the color drained from Sylphie's face, Sieg would start crying, and Roxy would reassure them that everything was fine and that we wouldn't fall. Not that Roxy knew enough to make that promise.

I knew we wouldn't fall. If I ever thought we might, I'd have fixed the box to the cliff face and exterminated those monsters. With no reason to think they were a threat, I continued our ascent. The monsters managed to jam their necks through the window every now and then, but Eris would quickly lop them off, and that was the end of that. The soil of the box started to become stained with their blood, but hey, it wasn't like we'd spent all our lives in the lap of luxury, you know? We weren't sheltered and could all stand a bit of gore. Nobody complained.

After a while, I slotted the box into the cliff face, rinsed the walls off with a bit of water, and took a break. My somewhat late lunch came in a box that Lilia and Aisha had prepared as we departed. It was a sandwich. Two hardened slices of bread with some meat and vegetables stuck in the middle. It had a simple taste to it, not far off from my usual fare, but having a bite while looking over the vast scenery outside wasn't half bad.

"It's nice to chill out like this every now and then," said Eris. She was gazing out the window while chomping on her sandwich sloppily enough to get crumbs everywhere.

"Really, Eris. Mind your manners," chided Sylphie.

"Yeah, I get it," said Eris, who clearly did not get it. It'd been a long time since I'd seen this particular fight.

"Hey widdle Sieg, it's Daddyyy. Time to get you in the bath, champ!"

I was looking after Sieg while Sylphie ate. I changed his diaper and then made a little tub with earth magic to bathe him in.

This close, his hair really was green, and his ears were maybe just a bit longer than a human's. His face was the perfect average of mine and Sylphie's. Naturally. I would've been worried if he *didn't* have any of my features.

He laughed when I brought my face in close and played peekaboo, and stared off into space when I moved away. When I picked him up, he'd stare deep into my face.

When Lucie was born, she looked incredulous at every movement she made, which made me worry that she might have been a reincarnation. I was on my fourth child now, so I'd stopped having those sorts of doubts. No matter how many children I had, I knew I'd love all of them.

When I offered my index finger to Sieg, he gripped it tight. He was pretty strong. Babies are born pretty strong, huh?

The moment after that thought crossed my mind…

“Owwwchgggh!”

I heard a snap accompanied by a sudden rush of pain. My instincts told me to yank my hand away from Sieg, but I took a breath, and then calmly used my left hand to peel Sieg’s hand off of my finger.

When I took a look at the index finger that the pain was coming from…

“No way…”

It was broken. Come on, seriously?

“Sieg?” shouted Sylphie as she sprang over in the next instant. When she saw my finger, her eyes widened. “Huh? Rudy, your finger…”

“Yep. It’s broken.”

“…”

Sylphie was at a loss for words. Eventually, she lifted her hands to mine and wrapped them around my index finger. A faint light glowed from within her cupped hands and the pain disappeared.

A silently cast healing spell. Bravo.

“Thank you, Sylphie.”

“Don’t mention it…”

“He’s a strong one.”

“Yeah. He got me, too.”

With that, Sylphie showed me her wrist. There was a vivid hand-shaped scar on it.

Hmm. Did this boy strangle any serpents while we weren’t looking? I was pretty sure that he hadn’t left our sight over the past month.

“If he’s this strong as a kid, then he’s got a bright future as a swordsman.”

He might even set out to slay a hydra or something… Wait, did his dad die in that story? I'd be another Paul.

"You never know," Sylphie chuckled. "After seeing Zanoba, I feel like it's not a guarantee…"

Despite Zanoba being a little wild when he was young, he grew up to have a perfectly healthy obsession with dolls. That's probably what Sylphie was referring to. She might not have known, however, that he was a capable man on the battlefield. In raw force, sure, but also in courage and cunning.

"I can teach him to use a sword!" Eris chimed in, having finished wolfing her sandwich down.

There was once a time where I doubted if Eris could possibly be a teacher. I couldn't deny that Norn and the other University of Magic students were learning plenty about swordsmanship from her. I wouldn't refer to the things she taught as "classes," but from what I heard, the expertise she passed on was valuable.

Still, compared to Ruijerd's "Do you understand?" or Paul's onomatopoeic grunts, she was leagues more helpful. I'd say her teaching style was close to Ghislaine's. Common sense.

Eris considered it her duty to teach swordsmanship to the children, so she even prepared kid-sized wooden swords for them. Lucie was already swinging a sword under her tutelage. My kids were getting their extracurricular education in early.

"Looks like our children will all know how to handle both swords *and* sorcery," said Roxy, who planned to teach them magic. Lucie had started practicing spell incantations little by little. When it came to learning magic, the sooner you started, the better. Kids that age had more mana than they knew what to do with.

We wouldn't have any problems if I left the magic education to Roxy. The whole brood was bound to be Saint-tier magicians by the time they were adults.

“I can’t wait to see how everyone grows up,” I said to Sylphie. She broke out into a smile and agreed. It was a relief to see a smile on her face after so long.

***

We resumed our long ascent.

We stopped seeing the avian monsters at around two thousand meters. In their place, we saw monsters that looked like winged goats and snake-necked lizards. The lizards lived in the crevices of the cliff face. They popped their heads in through the window that faced the cliff and startled us all. Their long necks allowed them to maneuver their heads with an alarming precision, and they were coming for us. Or they would have been, had we not separated their heads from their bodies in five seconds flat.

They must have evolved necks like that to drag prey into the crevices of the precipice. Excluding those guys, our trip was uneventful. We bagged one of the goats for dinner and ignored the rest as we continued our climb.

***

I had now swapped the pillars over sixty times.

The world outside was blanketed in a thick fog. We had to be poking into the clouds by now.

It was already night. Our box was illuminated by my lamplight spirit, but I was fatigued, and conflicted as to whether I should stop for a nap or if I should continue climbing. *Given our elevation, we should be close to our destination…*

As that thought crossed my mind, the fog happened to clear, and with it, the view outside the window. Not just the one facing

away from the precipice, but the one facing toward it, as well.

I stopped raising the pillars. Outside, a grassy field shimmered in the moonlight.

It was the Divine Continent.

Chapter 3:
Aluce, City of the Divine Continent

SO THERE we were.

As we got our bearings after stepping out of the box, a wide, open plain spread out before us. Maybe it was the cold, or maybe it was the thin air, but there wasn't so much as a single tree growing. The ground was covered in nothing but short grass and shrubbery.

Well, we *were* three thousand meters above sea level. Our breaths turned white in the chill. Fortunately, there wasn't any snow, and the land was smooth and flat. It wouldn't be too hard to travel. It was looking like we'd make good time and reach Aluce within a day.

For now, though, the moon was high in the sky. The stars twinkled brightly down upon us, possibly because we were that much closer to them. The night hid plenty of monsters, and it was easy to get lost in the dark.

For now, we set up camp.

We decided to eat the goats we'd hunted earlier. We made a campfire, heated up some water in a pot I made with earth magic, and tossed in some goat bones to make the stock. We added the meat once the water was boiling as well as some spices we brought along. Voilà, goat soup.

It was Geese who taught me how to cook monsters like this. Now he was my enemy. You never know where life might take you.

Anyway, it was cold out, so I moved the box onto the continent's shelf. We'd all huddle together and sleep inside of it. There wasn't any firewood lying around, but I'd brought a night's worth of our own stock just in case. We moved the campfire into the box, crafted a chimney in the roof, and slept in a warmed room.

The adults here had done enough traveling to not mind a little cold, but we had to consider Sylphie's body and Sieg. Sieg's cheeks

were bright red, but it didn't seem like he had a fever. He was doing fine. Just as Orsted'd said, his body was built tough. Still, infants could easily get sick, so I had to keep an eye out.

While the box we were in was sturdy, there was always the possibility that some boar-like monster could charge at us from across the plain and knock the whole thing clean off the cliff. We took shifts standing guard one at a time while the other three slept.

Snuggling up with the ladies caused my little lad (the one *not* named Sieg or Arus) to spring wide awake, but I controlled myself. Sorry, Sieg, a new baby brother or sister will have to wait a while.

***

The next day, we trekked onward.

The city of Aluce was northeast of our current location, with nothing but wide, empty plains in between. It didn't look like there was a landmark in sight…at first.

Long ago, a hero came to this land and crossed the Divine Continent. In the era of the Laplace War, he climbed to the Divine Continent from the Demon Continent side, and then obtained a hidden skill that would prove invaluable to their victory. In case he met with an untimely demise, the hero left landmarks showing the path toward the technique he obtained.

Incidentally, that hero went by the name of "Perugius."

Given that the land here had short grass and few trees, the markers stood out pretty blatantly. All we had to do was glance around once morning came, and what do you know? One was right over there.

As we approached, we found that the landmarks were pillars. They were about a meter and a half tall, likely made from earth magic. They were just thick enough for you to wrap your arms around. The upper part of the pillar was scuffed and worn down by

time. If you took a cross section, you could see that the pillar wasn't cylindrical, but instead shaped like a drop. The tapered tip of that drop pointed toward the city.

So it was written in *The Legend of Perugius*. This landmark doubtless only made sense to the people who read that book. As I'd expect from a trial given by Perugius himself, his book held plenty of hints. Not that I thought he wrote the thing himself.

A few hours passed as we traveled.

Maybe it was because we were on a plain and not a highway, but there were a lot of monsters around. They mostly fell into one of three types: the Winged Goats that first appeared at around two thousand meters up, the Heaven's Mustelas that looked like four-meter-long weasels, and the giant, bipedal birds of prey known as Nidhogg Ostriches. There didn't seem to be many amphibian or insect monsters, assumedly because it was cold all year round up here. In terms of strength, I'd put them on the same level as the monsters in the northern part of the Central Continent. They weren't as weak as those found near Asura Kingdom or Millis, but they also weren't as strong as those on the Demon Continent or the Begaritt Continent. The only monsters that made flocks numbering in the double digits were the Winged Goats, with the Heaven's Mustelas and Nidhogg Ostriches roaming either alone or in the occasional pair.

I'd put the Winged Goats at D rank, and the other two in the C range. They were all capable of flight, however, so I'd have to bump them up a rank if they appeared in the Central Continent. People have a psychological weakness against things that can fly.

For adventurers like us, it goes without saying they posed almost no threat. Eris diverted the Winged Goats' attention while Roxy hung back to launch a high-rank spell to wipe them out. Eris could finish the other two kinds by herself without thinking about it. They couldn't reach *me*, much less Sieg or Sylphie. Ah, I was so grateful to the man of the house for protecting us!

We kept our guard up anyhow. The Divine Continent for sure held greater challenges than that. Even if we didn't pass through them on our trip, the forests, mountains, or at minimum the labyrinths would have stronger monsters than these.

The Divine Continent labyrinth known as Hell housed hordes of the world's nastiest monsters, with its innermost sanctum guarded by a vicious slime called Vita. The mention of a slime reminded me of the Demon King one back in the Library Labyrinth. According to Orsted, this one was on another level. We didn't want to go near it.

I wasn't going to breathe a word of this to Eris. She'd want to go if she knew. Or, wait—Eris was a mature adult, now. She was far more logical and accommodating than she was in her spoiled princess days. She might want to go deep down, but she wouldn't demand it. Right?

I overheard them broach the subject…just small talk.

"Come to think of it," Eris piped up, "the Divine Continent has a labyrinth called Hell, right?"

"It does," said Roxy. "I hear it's quite dangerous. It's one of the Three Great Dungeons, in fact."

"I wish I could go."

"Let's see… I think with our current members, we could get pretty far in. Rudy doesn't like labyrinths too much, though. He lost Paul in one, after all…"

"Oh, right…"

Roxy shut her down for me.

"What about you, Sylphie?"

"Hm?"

I turned my head to see that Eris tossed the question to Sylphie, who was playing with the baby in the carrier on my back.

"Are you into labyrinths at all?"

“Hmm… I suppose not. My children are more important to me right now.”

Sylphie reached a hand out and stroked Sieg’s head as she answered. Her tone was nonchalant. It sounded like her mental health was starting to recover.

No, that was a short-sighted way of thinking. I couldn’t assume from the surface. I needed to rebuild her trust. Back when Paul had the affair that got Lilia pregnant, it took him forever to regain Zenith’s trust. There was once a time when I didn’t understand why Zenith stayed angry for so long, or why she didn’t just forgive him. Now, I understood; it was because Paul only reacted to what he saw on the surface, and only groveled until he got what he wanted.

I wasn’t supposed to be looking for a smile. I had to do everything in my power to regain her trust. It wasn’t going to get done in a day, but no matter how long it took, I had to show with my actions that I loved not just Sylphie, but my children as well.

Thinking about how, exactly, to do that, well…that was the hard part. I’d have to seize any opportunities as I thought of them.

With that on my mind, we continued our journey.

***

It was evening when we saw the city.

“Is that Aluce?”

“It seems kind of…humble.”

Roxy wasn’t kidding. All we saw across the plain was a series of houses built from rock, soil, and bone, all surrounded by a rather low fence. There were no fortified ramparts—a rarity for towns in this world. But maybe they had the right idea. A wall of any height wouldn’t do much to stop monsters that could fly. Still, was it wise to have no line of defense for your city?

I had my doubts as I approached the fence, but as I did… How to describe it? I felt as though a film had been placed over the town. It was like looking at the town through a sheet of glass.

“Looks like a barrier. A big one, at that.”

Upon hearing Roxy’s words, my understanding finally caught up with how the town was *actually* protected. Of course. There was no way it’d be left *completely* defenseless.

“Think they’ll let us in?” Sylphie asked.

“Hard to say,” I answered, approaching the barrier. “Orsted didn’t say anything about this.”

Then again, not many of my acquaintances knew much about the skyfolk to begin with. You didn’t see skyfolk on other continents, so I had no idea what they were like. Were they exclusionary, or were they friendly toward other races?

Sylvaril was pretty much the only skyfolk I’d met, and given that she didn’t seem to regard me with much favor, that colored my assumptions. On the other hand, she was plenty lenient with people Perugius held in high regard, like Zanoba. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I feared.

Sylvaril’s personality, that is. Not skyfolk as a whole.

Anyway, if nobody thought to warn me beforehand, then there surely wasn’t any danger. None of the “suddenly getting attacked” variety, at any rate.

We came to an edge of the barrier alongside a fenced portion of the town. Barriers in this world typically acted like walls, cordoning off a specified area. That said, barriers could act entirely differently on the Divine Continent. Like, maybe they would deliver an electric shock on contact that fried you to a crisp…

“This one’s pretty sturdy. I wonder if I could cut it.”

Eris, meanwhile, was knocking on the barrier.

“Wait, Eris! Be careful about touching that! What if that thing zaps you?!”

“Huh?! I-I know that…”

A shudder ran down Eris’s spine. Talk about reckless, coming to who-knows-where and putting her hands all over who-knows-what.

“So, what *do* we do?”

“That’s…a good question.”

If we raised our voices from outside the barrier, would it reach anyone inside the town? From what we could see, the inside of the fence was just farmland.

Hold on, did skyfolk even *make* farms? Well, I guess they did. It’s not like people with wings didn’t need to eat. Even that telepathic race that lived deep in the Demon Continent still farmed. Farming is key to life.

Never mind agriculture right now—how were we supposed to get in? My gut feeling would be to walk around the fence until we saw something that looked like an entrance, but there was no gap as far as I could see. There was nothing that seemed like a road either, so no clues there.

Actually, did a race of people who could fly even have the concept of making gaps like a gate to serve as an entrance? If you didn’t walk on the ground, you wouldn’t need to make roads. Did that mean we should have been looking for an entrance in the sky? I didn’t prepare a way for us to fly… Hmm. Destroying the barrier was starting to look like a better idea. We’d repair it later, of course, but we wouldn’t get anywhere until we got in.

“All right, let’s break it.”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

“Actually, Eris, I was thinking of using my Stone Cannon to—”

“Sorry to cut in,” said Roxy, who was looking through the barrier. “But it looks like we have company.”

We followed her gaze to see birds flying toward us from within the town. Even as far off in the distance as they were, I could tell they were pretty large. Probably about the size of people… Wait. Those *were* people. People with wings. Skyfolk.

“Did they get suspicious because we knocked on their barrier?” Sylphie asked.

She might have been right. The best response to monsters appearing outside of your city was to exterminate them, even if they were still outside of a barrier.

Well, whatever the case, first impressions were important. Time to brush off those customer service skills that work had been drilling into me.

“…”

The skyfolk descended upon us with no sound beyond the flaps of their wings. There were three of them. They wore simple robes of…well, it sounds strange to describe them as bird pelts, but something along those lines. They held spears in their hands. That was a bit unusual; the only race I’d seen use spears were the Superd.

They eyed us with suspicion. I couldn’t blame them. Humans pretty much never climbed the cliff to get up here. I, on the other hand, was beaming. I welcomed them with the ol’ Rudeus Smile.

“Ahem, do excuse us. I am Rudeus Greyrat. I came because Lord Perugius demanded that I have my child baptized here. Would you perhaps be acquainted with him?”

“…”

I opened by speaking in Human Tongue, but they responded in a language that I didn’t understand. I looked to my wives for help, while the skyfolk speaker looked to his two companions.

“Yes, that’s Sky God Tongue,” said Roxy. “What should we do?”

That made sense. The Divine Continent’s default language was Sky God Tongue. *Crap, I’m completely ignorant*…is something that would have tripped up the *old* Rudeus. But now, I was Orsted’s subordinate. I was hardly unprepared for a little obstacle like this.

“Don’t worry, I came prepared.”

I simply spoke in Human Tongue to start us talking. Even if my words couldn’t get across, my intention to converse would. Our interaction should have quickly communicated that we had no hostility.

“Ahem.”

I cleared my throat. While I had certainly prepared, I didn’t quite have the time to study the nuances of Sky God Tongue. This called for a signboard. I took out the bundle of paper from within my jacket, flipped to a specific page, and showed it to our receptionists. On it was a transcription of what I’d just said in Sky God Tongue. All that was left was to trust in their literacy skills…

“!!!”

The skyfolks’ reaction was dramatic. They immediately pulled up a stake from in front of the fence, and then spread their arms and wings to welcome us inside.

We entered the Divine Continent city of Aluce.

***

The city of Aluce was a bit plainer than I expected. The houses were indeed crafted from bone, rock, soil, and hay. Many of the buildings topped out at three or four stories. If I had to pick one thing that was particularly unusual, it was that I couldn’t see any staircases. I guess people here didn’t need them when they could fly.

The skyfolk tended to the farmland dressed in bird feather pelts fashioned into jackets. The most startling difference here was that the people had wings, so they took flight even when moving short distances. A few had been flying in circles above us to get a good look at their new visitors since our arrival.

Other than that, it was the sort of Podunk farming village you'd find anywhere. Pretty similar to Buena Village, I guess.

I was expecting a bit more, you know, Roman-ish architecture, or maybe something a bit more angelic or a Heaven-ish vibe…but hey, the skyfolk were people who had wings. No more, no less. Aluce was probably a backwoods settlement on the edge of the continent, so it checked out.

There was no lodging here, and nobody spoke Human Tongue. That said, there was one word we could both understand: "Perugius." Given how readily they welcomed us, these people must have held a deep gratitude toward the man.

We were led to some sort of meeting place. They brought us food, while a guy who resembled a village elder talked about something with a smile. Then he broke out the alcohol.

One thing that I found a bit strange: all the locals wanted to touch Sieg's feet. I was suspicious early on, but the village elder started the trend. The locals followed one after another, and I accepted them without turning them away. He was the baby that came for Perugius's trial, so maybe they thought he had some good luck that would rub off on them.

I might have felt a bit unnerved by such lavish treatment under normal circumstances, but they seemed to have good intentions, so I accepted their welcome at face value and lodged for the night at the gathering hall.

That evening, after putting Sieg to sleep, I talked a bit with Sylphie.

"Turns out this place is pretty normal," said Sylphie.

“Yeah. I expected some kind of uncharted natural wonder since it’s called the ‘Divine Continent,’ but everyone living here is just a regular person. Outside of the flying thing.”

“I’ve never left the Central Continent. Are the others normal, too?”

Hearing that reminded me of the wild splendor of the Demon Continent. The northwestern edge of Biegoya. The residents there looked differently, talked differently, and lived in houses unlike anywhere else’s. Outside of that, yeah, they were pretty much the same.

“Yeah, I guess they are. Each place has some slightly different customs, though.”

“Ranoa and Asura have some differences there, yeah…”

Sylphie went quiet after saying that. Her face was tense, as though she was deep in thought. She didn’t look depressed.

“Is something the matter?”

“I was just thinking that nobody treated Sieg weirdly.”

“Ah, yeah, they didn’t.”

The skyfolk of the Divine Continent didn’t participate in the Laplace War. Their isolation on the Divine Continent allowed them to be the one race to escape Laplace’s invasion. Of course they wouldn’t fear the Superd. That was why the warrior people of the village still used spears, and why they didn’t show any reaction to Sieg’s or Roxy’s hair colors.

According to Orsted, long ago…as in, over four thousand years ago during the time of the second Human-Demon War, they despised demons. No matter how long-lived your race is, though, four thousand years is a lot of time. Generations and generations. That hatred must have withered away.

Wait… No, it was possible that hearing the word *Perugius* had made them careful not to show overt hostility.

“If only everyone could be like them,” said Sylphie. I saw her lips draw into a smile that looked almost forced.

Chapter 4:
Christening

THE NEXT MORNING, the villagers happily guided us as we departed the village. For some reason, they gave us a set of packed meals for everyone, some bundles of leaves that may have been medicine, and a carved wooden charm figure.

Though I call it a figure, it was nothing complex—just a simple wooden stick with plumage (I think from a skyfolk) stuck to it. Maybe it was the idol of this land's god, passed down throughout the ages. Like the Sky God. While it may have been simply crafted, its sheer pricelessness would have made Zanoba weep with joy.

"Thank you very much."

I said my thanks, and while my words weren't understood, my gratitude appeared to be. They responded to my parting words by folding up their wings and crossing their fists in front of their chests.

Aluce Hill was a tranquil place. The breeze billowing down its gentle incline was chilly, but the weather was clear, and its slope was decorated with a garden of white flowers. Sieg was sleeping soundly, thanks to all, and the rest of us had to fight off a wave of drowsiness ourselves.

"Fwah… Oh, right."

All of us suddenly getting sleepy despite just waking from a good night's rest couldn't have been a coincidence. I gave everyone a Qikara Fruit that I'd prepared beforehand.

I took another look at the garden of white flowers on the slope. The pollen released by those ferocious flowers had a strong soporific effect.

When squinting even further, I could see a single creature lying in wait, camouflaged against the garden. It was a monster called the Heaven's Glider. It hid among the sleep-inducing white flowers and

attacked anyone who fell asleep after venturing too close. It was rather small compared to other monsters, only about two meters long. It looked like a furry lizard. Its forearms were webbed like a bat's, and its tail had a venomous stinger. It was a more cautious monster than others and was known for never daring to move against prey that wasn't asleep.

Yeah, you could call it a coward. Sieg was sound asleep, but the Heaven's Glider didn't attack. It let us pass.

The sedative effect of the white flowers lasted for about one hour. According to Orsted, you'd never wake up from falling asleep in the garden, but the effects didn't last long if you got away from them quickly.

Still, Sieg was only a month old. Once we were far enough away, I cast an antidote spell on him for good measure. The Qikara Fruits had a strong stimulant effect, but giving that to an infant sounded dangerous.

"…!"

After a bit more walking, Eris gave us a signal, and we all crouched in response.

Atop the hill, there was a giant bird. I could have mistaken the sight of it stomping about on its two legs for a dinosaur had it not been for the feathers. It must have been around ten meters tall. Enormous.

"That's a big one…"

"I think that was called…Gigantic Jaw, if I'm not mistaken."

This was the strongest monster on this hill. In terms of rank, it'd be about an A. The residents of the Divine Continent feared encountering this monster. If it appeared near a town, they'd have to send all hands out to fend it off, or in the case of a smaller village, potentially evacuate the entire population. Travelers were even given charms imbued with the sole prayer of not running across this thing…

Oh. So that's what the charm was for.

"Oh, Rudy, look."

At Sylphie's suggestion, I looked past the monster to see what appeared to be a stone shrine. Our destination, I assumed.

"What should we do? Fight it?"

Good question. For now, the monster hadn't spotted us, so sneaking past was still an option…but I had a hunch that this was its territory, given that it showed no signs of leaving. A-rank monsters included ones that could reflexively dodge my Stone Cannon, so it wouldn't be a pushover in a fight.

I glanced at Eris and nodded. She looked like she heard me loud and clear, even though I still hadn't said a word. Guess we were taking it down. We still hadn't done anything trial-worthy up here, and I got the feeling we'd get a failing grade if we avoided it.

"Eris will draw its attention, I'll bind its feet, and once I do, Sylphie and Roxy will attack it together. I don't know if we can take it down in one hit, so aim for the wings first. If it looks like we can finish it off at that point, Eris will strike the final blow. If it looks like it can escape my Quagmire, Eris will buy some time while I finish it off. Okay?"

"Got it!" Eris confirmed as she leapt into the fray. She was like a dog who was sick of being told to stay put.

I turned my eyes to the other two. Roxy and Sylphie both ran to take positions where they could support Eris from either flank. I'd almost forgotten—Sylphie was *fast*. I doubted she was fully recovered from giving birth…maybe that sort of recovery was something that healing magic could speed along.

Wait, the monster already noticed Eris.

"Gaaaaaaaaah!"

"Goooooouuuwrhhh!!!"

The monster met Eris's roar with its own. Its bellowing threatened to rupture a nearby listener's eardrums, but Eris showed no fear. She would not be stopped. She charged for the monster barreling toward her, then halted for an instant. She'd sidestepped.

The next moment, the monster's beak was digging into the soil that she was standing on seconds before. It spread its wings and kicked off the ground to charge at an incredible speed.

Eris struck back as she dodged, and a spray of blood suddenly launched from the monster's maw. It'd noticed her, so that failed to serve as a killing blow. There was another reason it hadn't done the trick: the monster was simply too big, and its neck too high up. We'd have to stick to the plan and drag it down so we could beat the crap out of it.

"Quagmire."

The monster swung around to face Eris, and while it lowered its body to charge, a quagmire formed around its feet. They sank beneath the soil in an instant. It tried to flap its wings to escape. However…

"Majestic blade of ice, I summon thee to strike my enemy down! Icicle Break!"

"Sonic Blast!"

The spells from the other two shot forth and crushed the beast's flailing wings. The monster thrashed about, even with its only means of survival now smashed. The final thing to flash before the creature's eyes was a single swordswoman—a red-haired warrior who swung her blade high above her head.

"Hmph!"

With one terse breath, she struck. The Sword of Light. The hidden technique of the Sword God Style. Created to defeat not just humans, but any living being in a single blow. This slash was an instant kill in every sense of the word.

There was no sound. Eris's blade simply cleaved the monster's head in two, straight down the middle. The monster's eyes rolled back in its head as its body twitched. It didn't stop moving. Its body spasmed, its neck twisted every which way like a hose spewing far too much water for it to handle. It mindlessly lashed out at everything within reach.

One hit would have normally done the trick, but monsters start posing problems once they reach a certain size…

"Stone Cannon."

My Stone Cannon spell slammed into the monster's cranium. The attack wedged itself into the wound Eris opened, shredding the monster's brain before exiting through the back of its skull. Bone and gray matter spewed behind the monster with a resounding *splat*. The monster fell lifelessly, as though the strings pulling it had suddenly been cut. Its neck dropped into the quagmire with a thud.

"…"

Eris watched with caution for a bit, but after deciding the battle was over, she turned to me and started waving. Roxy lifted her staff to signal that she was okay as well. Sylphie was looking toward the monster with great interest, as though she'd never seen one so enormous in her life.

All right, that went well. We ganged up on it and emerged without a scratch. Things sure hadn't gone this smoothly back when I was traveling through the Demon Continent. Eris and I had grown stronger.

"Mmahhh, waaaah!"

Oops. Sieg woke up from his sleep and he started fussing around on my back. Aww, poor baby. Are you hungry? Or do you not like being on your daddy's back? Are you cold? If you are, sorry. We'll be back home safe and sound soon enough.

"Oooh…"

Just then, I realized. That the look on my face had changed dramatically. My wives could tell as they approached me, too. I gritted my teeth as I spaced out in horror, my gaze fixed on the defeated monster. It was lying in the quagmire, lifeless.

“Oh!”

Sylphie noticed it. The problem wasn’t the monster. It was something at my feet. There…yes, a steaming puddle had formed. That steam was wafting from my back as well. Curiously warm.

“Welp. Looks he got ya,” Roxy said, lightening the mood. Yes, she was right; Sieg got me. All over my back, in fact.

“Heh, to think, my own…son…right in the back. I let down…my guard… Sylphie… When you get home, tell Lucy and the others that I love them… I wanted to see them all grow up… But now, they’ll have to look out for each other as siblings to live on… Their old man will be having a cup of tea with Grandpa by the pearly gates…”

“Rudy, quit being dramatic. Let Sieg down and take off your robe and Magic Armor already! We’ve gotta wash them before the odor sticks!”

“Okay, fiiine.” I didn’t get to finish my monologue.

The shrine was right in front of us. We’d arrived at our destination.

***

It looked to be a bit small to call a shrine. It was about one meter tall and two meters wide. Its stone double doors were half-ajar, wide enough to just barely let a single person through. On the door was an emblem I was familiar with. Yes, that same emblem that I’d been wearing as of late, the one that looked like a dragon from a distance.

The emblem of the dragonfolk.

These were dragonfolk ruins.

I could see some sort of altar beside the ruins, but it was run-down and covered in moss. Perhaps this was some sort of magical implement? Something to hide the ruins from view. Compared to the ancient teleportation circles I'd grown accustomed to seeing, this one had a different air about it. People long ago must have made pilgrimages here.

The altar wasn't the only difference here. Some details about the shrine itself differed from the ruins that housed those circles. The ancient teleportation circles that I knew were single-story buildings with a basement. From what I could tell through the half-ajar doorway, this shrine had stairs. Stairs that descended into darkness. When I tried knocking on the door with my gauntlet, the sound echoed for quite a while. It must go deep into the earth.

Hmm… I know I was told to get a baptism here…but did a place like this really have anyone living inside? There *had* been a monster waltzing around right its doorstop, one that the locals dreaded handling.

"Anybody home?" I called out, to no reply. I turned around and gave the others a confused look, as though to suggest that we might have taken a wrong turn. All I got in return was Eris's curt command: "Get in there already."

Well, guess I'd peek inside. If we found the wrong place, we could always keep looking.

"Pardon me…" Just in case, I made my entrance known before setting foot inside.

I took out a lantern spirit scroll that I had equipped to a socket of my Magic Armor and illuminated our descent. The stairwell had built up a thin layer of dust, making me wonder if it'd seen much use lately. I also had to wonder if someone was regularly cleaning it, as I found no moss growing anywhere. It might not have been homey, but it still had subtle signs of human life.

One step at a time, slowly but surely, I descended the stairwell. Right behind me were Eris, Roxy, and Sylphie. I was still carrying Sieg on my back, so it might have been best to let Eris take the lead…

Before I finished that thought, the staircase came to an end. There was yet another half-cracked door before me. Once again, it was only wide enough to let a single person through. This time, though, a faint light leaked through. Was there someone inside? Or was there a monster that used light to lure in its prey?

I was getting a little nervous…but I'd have to handle it.

"I'll scout ahead," I declared as I gave Sieg to Sylphie.

"I'll go with you," said Eris.

I nodded. The two of us slipped through the door into a large, wide-open space. It was almost like a plaza, supported by a handful of thick pillars.

I got a strange feeling, like I was walking into a sacred place. A second feeling, more like a hunch really: this place looked less like the previous dragonfolk ruins I'd seen and more like Perugius's floating fortress. The thickness and placement of the pillars seemed especially similar to the floating fortress's audience chamber. This place really must've drawn inspiration from Perugius.

Candlestands adorned the walls, dim in the room's vastness. They weren't alone; at the opposite end of the room was some sort of fountain, and it cast a pale blue light that illuminated the entire place.

If we approached, would a monster come out and attack us? Or would we inspect it to find that our HP and MP had been restored? Whichever was the case, a pathway that passed the fountain led even further into the shrine.

I didn't sense any danger in this room, so I decided to call Sylphie and Roxy inside…but just as I thought to do that, I heard a tapping sound.

Footsteps. Multiple sets of feet. They sounded like they came from that pathway next to the fountain.

I took a stance to protect the door behind me. Eris followed by taking a step forward and readying her blade. I really did hope that those footsteps belonged to people who could be reasoned with… but if they looked like trouble, a temporary retreat was always an option.

The owners of the footsteps revealed themselves. One look told me that these guys were trouble. It also told me that they *might* be reasoned with.

Across from us was a group of three people in masks. Sylvaril, Arumanfi, and Nanahoshi.

“You arrived rather quickly, Rudeus Greyrat.”

And then…Perugius appeared.

“I heard that a Gigantic Jaw was roaming the area…but I should have known that it would hardly be much of a trial to you.”

Was I on a hidden camera or something? I came here assuming it was a trial, but the guy who told me to do it showed up at the finish line. Was someone going to point to a corner and tell me to smile?

“So… Um?”

“What are you dawdling for? Bring your baby inside already.”

Despite my confusion, Perugius commanded me as though this was no surprise. He stood waiting by the side of the fountain.

What was going on? For now, at least, it didn’t seem like we’d be getting into a fight. Nanahoshi was here, as though she were one of Perugius’s familiars, but he wouldn’t have brought her along if he planned to fight.

Or wait, did I have that backward? Could he have brought Nanahoshi *because* he intended to fight? Maybe because I wouldn’t want her to get hurt? No, that would be ridiculous. This was the great

Lord Perugius. He wouldn't stoop to such a cowardly trick, right? *Right?*

I decided I might as well allow Sylphie and Roxy inside. The moment Roxy entered, Perugius furrowed his brow for a moment.

"Lord Perugius, a demon…"

Sylvaril's tone was disapproving. This was something I'd hoped she could overlook. This wasn't the floating fortress, after all.

"Hmph, very well."

Such a magnanimous monarch. A real magmo.

Anyway.

The fountain looked just large enough for a grown adult to bathe in. Actually, after getting right up on it, I saw that it was less a fountain and more of an oval-shaped stone bathtub. A magic circle had been carved into the bottom of the tub, and that was the source of this fountain's light. The light diffused through the water, lending the entire room an eerie glow. It had the surreal beauty of a nighttime pool, but it was clear that this pool was some sort of magical implement.

Or maybe not quite. This magical implement appeared to be incomplete. There were some more magic circles carved into stones within the tub, but those weren't lit up. There were also a few recessions around the tub that seemed designed to hold something, but nothing occupied them. It was probably missing a few parts.

"What…is this?"

"This is the baptismal font," Sylvaril answered.

I see—the fountain for baptizing.

Just then, Sylvaril strode up to Sylphie.

"The baby," Sylvaril curtly commanded as she offered both hands to Sylphie.

A shiver ran through Sylphie's body. She looked back and forth between Sylvaril's hands and me.

“What, is Lord Perugius gonna baptize my son himself?” I asked half-jokingly.

“Yes,” she shot back. “Is that a problem?”

“Oh, not at all! Perish the thought.”

Did that mean Perugius had us come all the way here, beat us, and then made a grand entrance…just so he could perform a baptism?

Well, he had no other backup here. If Perugius wanted to do anything to Sieg, it would have been easier to get away with it back in the flying fortress. I didn’t think he’d choose to strangle him or drown him. Then again, taking me on in the flying fortress would have broken some furniture. so it was possible that he lured me to the Divine Continent so we could metaphorically take this outside…

No. Perugius had done so much for me until now. I had to trust him here.

“Sylphie.”

I gave her a look. Sylphie gasped for a moment, but she soon took a deep, determined breath and handed Sieg to Sylvaril.

Sylvaril gently wrapped Sieg in her arms and wings, walked toward Perugius, and took a knee. She reverently offered Sieg to Perugius. Perugius settled down on the altar, then looked closely at the baby before him.

“Hmm… Green hair, slightly pointed ears. Eyes like a piercing flash of light, yet he appears gentle overall. A good kid.”

I mean, I agreed…but I was getting nervous. Could this baptism show that Sieg was really Laplace, and then get him killed on the spot? It wasn’t like I didn’t trust him, but oooh, this was scary… I couldn’t bear to watch. I had to peer at it through my Demon Eye of Foresight.

In the vision my Demon Eye showed me, *Perugius scoops some water with one hand.* A second later, that came to pass. Perugius lifted the water between tightly cupped hands. He

proceeded to cross his arms, push his fists into his shoulders, and hold that pose in silence for a few seconds. Then, slowly, he opened his hands and brushed Sieg's cheek.

"In the name of the Dragon King Perugius, I grant my blessings to this baby, this egg of mankind. By my hand, I baptize thee, and in my name, I christen thee. So that this child may break out of his shell and grow strong, wise, and gentle, I bestow upon him the name… Saladin."

Perugius's hand—or rather, the water than Perugius's hand was drenched in—glowed a faint yellow. The water continued to glow for some time. Once Perugius saw that the light had faded, he lifted the baby up and handed him back to Sylvaril.

The kneeling Sylvaril reverently accepted him and carried him gently as she stood. Slowly, Sylvaril returned to Sylphie and offered her the baby. Sylphie looked a bit dazed as she accepted Sieg into her arms.

I tried peering into Sieg's face, but he didn't seem any different. He looked at Sylphie and me with a blank expression, just like a month-old baby normally would. His hair was still green, too. What just happened?

"So… Um?"

"Hmph."

Perugius rose with a grunt and casually walked toward me. He uttered something right to my face that shook me to my core.

"I don't know what's gotten into your head, but I've long known that that baby isn't Laplace."

It took me five full seconds to understand the words that came out of his mouth.

"Uh… Y-you have?"

"Arumanfi is my eyes. I would never mistake the sight of Laplace. The hue of green in his hair is entirely different. His eye color differs, too. His mana fails to impress. And he lacks that

abominable curse, that which makes one shudder from the bottom of their heart."

Did that mean…Perugius knew from the moment Sieg was born that he wasn't Laplace?

"You seemed to pay it too much heed, so I called you to this shrine. This water is made to change color if certain people make contact with it. If that person had been Laplace, it would have glowed red."

"But it changed to yellow, right?"

"He's no Blessed Child, but the Laplace Factor he carries is strong. Have you not noticed his vigor or his unusual strength?"

"I have."

Huh, I *did* think it was strange how strong he was. That explained it. And hey, good health is hardly a bad thing.

Still, he wasn't Laplace. What a relief… But wait.

"Doesn't that mean you had Arumanfi crash Sieg's birth for absolutely no reason?"

"For that, I apologize. Though by coincidence, it appears I summoned you at a poor time. Though it would have been an excellent time if your child really *had* been Laplace."

Uhhh. Really wish you could've mentioned that earlier. Seriously, what the heck?

"So, what did we come all this way for…?"

"For the baptism. Long ago, Asura Kingdom had a tradition in which the person tasked with granting a child their name would give that child a baptism and christening in the land of their birth. In addition, the parents would journey with their newborn to that land… though it's a long-forgotten tradition by now."

"Uh… Granting their name?"

"Don't give me that dumbstruck look. You once promised me, did you not? That you would bring your son for me to name. You

may henceforth call this child Saladin."

I did?

Actually, wait, I got the feeling that I *might* have. When he told me to bring him, I think something to that effect did indeed get said by…someone. Me, maybe. I meant it as a joke, though…

"But, um, this child…"

"No need to thank me," Perugius declared as he stood up. "It is but a small gift that I grant you."

But, uh, this kid kind of already had a perfectly good name. Sieghart. Uh… I was at a loss. Talk about an offer I couldn't refuse.

Oh, well. Sieghart Saladin Greyrat, then. It kinda rolled off the tongue. Sounded tough, too. Knowing the name came from Perugius himself gave it a real punch. Yep, not bad. About as *not bad* as *not bad* got. That was about how I felt about it.

Sieg gained a new name, and our baptism journey came to an end.

***

Well…not quite.

We returned to the floating fortress via teleportation magic. Just when we felt like we could finally relax and go home, Perugius commanded us to come to the throne room one last time.

Roxy wasn't permitted due to being a demon, so she went home early. I considered sending Sylphie home as well, but she apparently had other ideas, so she stuck with me. Eris stood behind me with her arms crossed. She'd be there no matter what.

We stood before the twelve spirits and Perugius.

"I believe we've gotten sidetracked enough. Let us broach the real issue," Perugius spoke while seated imperiously in the throne of

the floating fortress.

Real issue? We had a real issue?

Ah, I see. Perugius must have had business beyond just my kid. Guess he wanted something else.

“Rudeus Greyrat.”

He looked down on me with a stern glare, completely unlike what he’d shown before. What was the deal? *What’d I do?*

“I hear you’ve formed an alliance with Atofe.”

Oh, that… Yeah, Perugius wasn’t on great terms with Atofe. Maybe I should’ve given him a heads-up before asking her.

“Regardless of the forthcoming battle with Laplace, why would you speak to a woman such as her without so much as consulting me?”

“Well, you see, uh—”

“But that, I shall let pass. I can stomach the indignation in light of the determination you showed earlier. It is water under the bridge. After all, I always intended to fight Laplace on my own.”

So, we’re cool?

“There is one more matter.”

Perugius signaled something with a jerk of his chin, and a single girl stepped forward. She was a girl of about sixteen in a white mask. She was a girl who, as time passed, didn’t age. She now looked younger than both Sylphie and me.

Nanahoshi Shizuka. The girl among twelve vassals stepped forward and removed her mask. Then, with a conflicted expression, said, “I completed the magic circle to return home.”

“I see. Finally, huh?”

The response came from Orsted behind me, who seemed to materialize from nowhere. Nanahoshi looked at Orsted as she clenched a fist in front of her chest.

“Yes. Orsted. After all this time… Though it might not be perfect.”

“Well done.”

Orsted spoke warmly. They were just a couple of short words, but their brevity emphasized how they clearly came from his heart.

“Yeah… Yeah!”

Nanahoshi’s voice wavered. Her face screwed up to stop the tears that were on the verge of flowing; she looked up ever so slightly to hold them back. Heck, she almost had me crying, too.

The home teleportation circle. The thing that Nanahoshi had dreamed of for all this time.

Returning home was the one thing she strove for. She was immensely homesick. She’d gone from an idea to a theory, to failure, and then yet another idea. Once she finally had the theory nailed, she had to make the technology a reality, sharpening her engineering skills with experiment after experiment.

It was nearing five years since she first began her apprenticeship under Perugius. A long time, indeed. And now, she finally completed it…

“Rudeus, I’m sorry to bug you when you’ve got so much on your plate,” Nanahoshi said.

“Oh, no. If anything, I should apologize for making you wait all that time…”

So, Nanahoshi was the one who called me here? And she waited this whole time without a single gripe? Even though she’d just finished her life’s work?

“It’s fine. Also, um, congrats. On the baby.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I was kinda surprised, actually. Guess you had a lot of stuff to consider…”

“Consider,” huh…? I wasn’t so sure I was the considering type. Not much that ran through my head qualified as a thought.

“I’m gonna need a bunch of mana for the final experiment. I know you have plenty of stuff to do, but would you please lend a hand?”

With that, Nanahoshi bowed to me. There was a fire in her eyes; she knew that this was the last step, that the goal was within reach.

“Of course.”

“This might take a month or two. Is that all right?”

“It…should be.”

A month, huh? I had reasons to refuse, but not a right to. I wanted to ask if it could wait until we defeated Geese, but I wasn’t enough of a jerk to say that out loud. Nanahoshi had waited long enough.

“Thank you so much,” Nanahoshi said, bowing yet again.

Just then, she happened to look Sylphie’s way. The mother whose face was still clouded with unease. Nanahoshi hopped over to her and whispered something in her ear. A jolt ran through Sylphie’s body, after which she turned to Nanahoshi with a stunned look on her face. Nanahoshi nodded. Sylphie glanced at me and then nodded back.

“All right then, let’s move to the teleportation circle.”

I had no idea what they’d discussed, but Nanahoshi declared that we were moving on.

Sylphiette

I THINK I GOT TRAPPED in my own head.

I worried all on my own, convinced myself I had to solve it all on my own, and overwhelmed myself into a sort of paralysis… But had I thought about it, I would've realized that I wasn't alone anymore. I had a family I could rely on. Rudy might have been half-joking at the time, but he did say something about "looking out for each other like siblings."

I never had siblings, but Sieg did. Lucie was doing her best to be a reliable big sister. It was hard to say I relied on her, she was still just a child, but I had the feeling she would grow up into someone I could trust. Knowing she had my blood in her made me doubt that a little, though…

Arus and Lara would grow up someday, too. Sieg wouldn't be alone.

I had support outside of my family. Nanahoshi told me that if I had any worries, I could talk about them with her. I didn't expect to hear something like that from her, so I was a little surprised. If I asked Queen Ariel, or Luke, or Zanoba, or Cliff, they'd likely lend me an ear, too.

I always thought that the way my hair color changed was a cowardly way out, and some part of me thought that people like Queen Ariel or Luke wouldn't have befriended me if my hair had stayed green, but now, I knew that none of that was true, that they surely would have befriended me all the same. Just like Rudy did all those years ago.

Well, sure, they might have been a bit more shaken at first. Maybe they would have caused a fuss about my hair, about my demon heritage, about how I had to be a Superd. I felt that despite it all, we surely would have reached the same relationships we had now.

Surely, Sieg could make those same sorts of friends. The way I made friends when Rudy taught me how back in my childhood. That was why I had to stop letting myself get bogged down in those worries. I'd teach Sieg those things myself.

As I had that thought, I looked up to see Rudy's back as he hiked in front of me.

"…"

For whatever reason, I decided to grab the hem of his sleeve.

Rudy turned around. He had the same look as ever; gentle, yet a tiny bit apologetic and concerned. I guess I inspired that in him.

"Rudy."

When I called his name, he looked around, signaling the others to go on ahead with his eyes. Everyone left, and once we were alone, Rudy wrapped his arms around my shoulders and held me. Softly, gently, so as to not crush Sieg, Rudy's slender, yet muscular body enveloped mine. His armor made him feel a bit stiff, but it comforted me.

"Rudy… I'm sorry, I think. It looks like I made you worry. I saw his green hair, and I remembered it, my past. I thought about it, about where it'd all lead. I thought that maybe this child wouldn't have a place in this world…"

"It's not your fault. Everyone gets worried sometimes. And hey, it's on me for forgetting to think up a name."

"Yeah… But also, you've been traveling with just Roxy and Eris lately, right? I got the idea that I'd have to protect the children all by myself…"

"That's not true at all!"

The strength of his denial startled me a little, but I should have expected it. Rudy would say that, wouldn't he?

"Yeah. I know. I knew, but I forgot. Sorry."

"Er, no. You don't have to apologize."

"I had a moment of weakness."

I patted Sieg's head. He'd been asleep for a while now. When had he dozed off?

This journey got me thinking—Sieg, he wasn’t as fragile as I thought. Not in terms of his power or his health. More like, his spirit was so *strong*.

“It’s okay now. I think looking at you on the journey—it comforted me. It made me remember that you really would protect us.”

Rudy chuckled. His face looked doubtful, as though in disbelief that any aspect of him could be comforting. But Rudy took things as they came. When Sieg had green hair, he didn’t lose his cool or anything. He’d even stared down Lord Perugius with courage. I was sure he’d have done the same if any other child faced that same kind of danger.

“Well… Sylphiette.”

Sometimes, Rudy would call me by my full name. He usually did this for one of two reasons: either he wanted to ask for something naughty, or he wanted to apologize.

“What is it, Rudeus?”

“You know, you can be mad at me for forgetting to name the baby. Okay?”

“Huh? But I wasn’t really mad, though… If I had to say, I was more disappointed and unnerved…”

I started getting flustered as I responded. I mean, when I heard that Rudy had forgotten to think of a name, all I thought of it was that my child might not be loved by Rudy or anyone else in the world. When I explained that to Rudy, he turned white as a sheet. It was a huge shock… Oh, but that’s right. That made sense. Being disappointed without being mad must have been even harder on him.

“Oh… I see. Got it, I’ll be angry next time. Don’t forget about me or our children ever again, buster!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rudeus nodded. He looked a little sheepish.

Rudy was so cute at times like these. He was also like this back when he took my clothes off while still thinking I was a boy…

Ooh, remembering that made me feel so embarrassed! I know, we were kids back then, and we'd seen each other naked so many times since, but still…

"Let's get going. You've gotta help Nanahoshi out, right?"

"Yeah… By the way, what was it she told you?"

It was nothing major. Just that she'd listen if I needed to talk. People say it to one another all the time.

"It's a secret."

I'd keep it close to my heart. I felt happy that Nanahoshi chose my ear to whisper in, not Rudy's.

I smiled. When I did, Rudy smiled back.

"Hey, Rudy," I said, unable to contain my joy. "I was kind of out of it for this trip, and I made everyone worry. When the kids are all grown up, and once things settle down for you… Well, that's a pretty long time from now. But when it happens, let's all go on another trip together."

"Yeah," Rudy answered with a firm nod.

We stayed together for a while, just gazing into each other's eyes. I closed my eyes on a whim, and Rudy took the opportunity to give me a gentle kiss. When I opened them again, I felt so embarrassed, yet also so happy, that my lips curled into an involuntary smile.

"Let's get going."

"Sure."

I nodded, and I bounded along to catch up with the others. Right beside Rudy.

Chapter 5:
Teleportation Device to Another World

FLOATING FORTRESS, basement floor fifty. Immediately after exiting the staircase, we found a wide entrance hall and in the middle of it, a magic circle.

The teleportation circle.

While it was similar to any other teleportation circle I could remember, something about it seemed off.

To start with the obvious, it was enormous. Probably fifty meters in diameter and about a meter tall. It was composed of stone tablets about a square meter in area and ten centimeters thick. Any given point on the circle had ten of them stacked atop one another, and these comprised the outline of the circle.

An enormous arch stretched over it, and the underside had been etched with cramped markings. These presumably formed part of a magic circle. It was a remarkably three-dimensional magic circle. The two-dimensional name no longer fitted. It was more of a magical device or apparatus.

“Cliff would be distraught if he saw this…”

That was Zanoba’s input. I’d gone back and retrieved him since this involved magic circles. This was far beyond something that Zanoba or I could draw. It would’ve been tough even for Roxy, who’d recently taken up studying everything she could about magic circles. Perhaps Cliff could…but he had no experience drawing something of this magnitude.

“A work of art,” remarked Perugius. He held his head high as though he himself had built the apparatus.

Perhaps it wasn’t entirely selfish. It must be very gratifying for someone you mentored to create a masterwork. Not to mention Perugius was probably involved with its design and construction.

“What say you, Orsted?” Perugius asked.

“This is a great deal of progress… I’m surprised.”

Orsted was back again out of the blue. When had he gotten here?

A three-dimensional magic circle made up of twenty-five thousand stone tablets. This was something that even Orsted, in all his lifetimes, had never seen before. The automatons that the Maniacal Dragon King left behind were composed of maybe fifty parts at most, none of them terribly large. Nanahoshi built this magic circle as if size limitations weren’t a consideration.

“As I thought. Look up, toward that arch.”

“Is that part of it? Doesn’t look connected.”

“Oh, but it is. That is a device to confirm a successful teleport. You’re aware that teleportation circles leave trace amounts of mana behind after use, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that changes based on the type of teleportation circle. By measuring that mana, we can judge whether or not the teleportation to another world was a success.”

“You can do that?”

“Hmph, to think that the day would come where I would have something to teach such a scholar.”

“You overestimate me. I’ve learned as much from you as I’ve offered.”

“Hmph. Platitudes. You knew it all from the moment I met you.”

Perugius and Orsted were having a friendly chat. Perugius sounded like he was smug over finally one-upping Orsted, but Orsted sounded like he was reminiscing over old times—perhaps with just a hint of pain behind his voice.

“Rudeus.”

Nanahoshi turned around and came to me.

“We’re gonna start off by sending simple stuff. Then we’ll look at the mana traces from the teleportation circle to check for teleportation to the other world. If that works, we’ll move on to teleporting live animals, and finally, me. Got it?”

“Sure, but I don’t want to cause another displacement incident, okay?”

“It’ll be fine. Trust me, we’ll be fine.”

Nanahoshi repeated that things would be *fine* twice, which was not comforting. She *did* hand me a detailed report earlier, but the page count was so massive that I couldn’t even skim it. It was a comfort that Nanahoshi had run experiment after experiment to ensure another displacement incident wouldn’t happen. Sylphie and I had even helped with a few.

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure.”

Well, her resolve seemed firm enough.

“All right, let’s do this.”

“Right. First, we’ll start with an apple…”

Nanahoshi must have prepared it beforehand. She picked up an apple from a basket in the corner of the room. She then climbed the apparatus, trotted to the middle, and placed the apple dead center.

“Lord Perugius, if you’d please.”

“Very well.”

Perugius moved to the opposite side of the magic circle. He wasn’t alone; his servants spread out to surround the perimeter, each one an equal distance apart. Sylvaril headed toward the base of the arch.

“Rudeus, over here.”

I followed Nanahoshi's directions and stood at a point just opposite of Perugius. There, I saw two hand-shaped slots I supposed were meant for me.

"When I give the signal, start pumping in mana. As much as you can."

"Got it."

I did as I was told and placed my hands inside. Something about all of this was strangely exciting. I looked back at Sylphie to find her staring in awe at the huge apparatus and talking about something with Zanoba. She had a passing knowledge of magic circles, so she must have been interested.

Eris wasn't joining in on their conversation; instead, she was confidently looking up at the arch in her usual pose. I think she liked big things. Behind her, Orsted stood stock still—

"Lord Perugius! Please assume your position!"

"Very well."

Oh, oops, gotta concentrate. I mean, not like I was doing much beyond pumping mana in, but still.

"Now… Begin."

Perugius and his servants all placed their hands on the magic circle at once. The edge of the magic circle immediately began to flicker. *Just* the edge, however. The fine details of the edge of the magic circle lit up brightly, but the area near the center stayed dark. Was this a failure?

"Rudeus."

"Right."

After hearing that, I started pouring in mana from my hands. Suddenly, my right hand felt like it was glued to the apparatus. I felt it sucking up a massive amount of mana. What I didn't understand was why it only came from my right hand. It was flowing from my left

hand as well, but it was a much weaker sensation. Was I supposed to strengthen the flow from my left hand?

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the amount of mana that it was sucking through my left hand drastically shot up. Conversely, the amount from my right hand decreased. *Right, left, right, left*. The strength at which it sucked mana switched back and forth. If I focused on the sensation, I could feel how the output of mana differed for each palm and fingertip.

It didn't feel mechanical; I could feel something human in its extraction. Who was controlling it… Perugius, huh? His expression didn't show it, but I guess there was more to his role than just booting the thing up. He also directed his assistants. This magical machine wasn't automatic once it booted up; it needed to be operated.

The lines of the magic circle slowly came to life. It changed colors from blue, to green, and then to white as its luminance overwhelmed the room. Soon, it was too bright to keep my eyes open. Was it only the magic circle lighting up the room like this? I'd never seen anything like it…

No. I had. Once. This was just like the displacement incident—

Blip.

With that sound, the light vanished.

Not all of it, though.

The arch. Only the arch continued to dimly light the room and the area directly below it—the center of the magic circle. The place where the apple *once* was. There, something remained. Something pale blue. Pale blue specks were now floating upward from the circle like bubbles before breezily vanishing into the air.

"Experiment succeeded," Sylvaril said.

"…"

Nobody responded. She continued her work as if this were entirely normal. She wrote something down on a nearby piece of paper.

"We'll now begin analyzing the residual mana in order to refine our accuracy toward the other world. We already have data on this subject, though, so I doubt it will take too long."

As I listened to Nanahoshi's explanation, I lifted my hands from the magic device.

"Rudeus, are you all right?"

The question made me recall the sensation of my mana being sucked away. That much…it was just one activation; it exhausted *that* amount of mana in a mere minute or two. A few more bouts like that would drain me entirely.

"I'm fine, but I can't handle many repeat performances."

"I see… Well, good job. We're planning to go at a pace of one activation every day or two, so you can take a rest for today."

Nanahoshi thanked me with a bow and ran over to Perugius. She took notes as she consulted with the research team. She was probably going to compile the data into a report and apply them to the next experiment.

The inter-world teleportation system itself was functional. All that was left was to complete the arch, analyze these mana traces, and to slowly but surely move toward objects that were more physically like Nanahoshi.

These final stages were supposed to take around a month. Losing that much time while Geese was on the loose wasn't ideal… but it was what it was. I thought of it as starting from scratch to make up for failing to make a firmer ally of Perugius before.

Two weeks passed. I commuted between my home and the floating fortress to assist with the experiments.

I exhausted a lot of my mana for those experiments, enough that I doubted if I could recover it all by the next day. I decided to limit my daily mana use as much as possible, conserving it for the experiments in case we were attacked unexpectedly.

With my decision to take it easy, things…got a lot more laid-back.

That's not to say I had nothing to do. I spoke with Zanoba about management of the doll sales; I talked to Roxy about potential improvements to the Magic Armor. I exchanged information with collaborators around the world via tablet. I strategized with Orsted about plans we'd yet to firm up. All kinds of things. I was not idle. Compared to the non-stop sprint of the last year and a half, however, it was a walk in the park.

I had several requests for my input on the management of the Mercenary Band or the doll sales—what have you—come my way via the contact tablet, but here I had more experts I could consult. I didn't have to decide on my own. What was more, I wasn't wasting time traveling, so I could see my kids before we all went to bed. I would talk about my day with Zenith as she read my mind, talk about Cliff with Elinalise whenever she dropped by, help teach Lara to talk, help Lucie with her studies, have Arus cry at me, and change Sieg's diapers.

This must have been what it felt like to be a chronic workaholic taking his first extended vacation in years. I was starting to understand why Orsted had been staying close to Sharia lately.

There were times I worried that I wasn't doing enough, but everyone needs a break. Maybe the best way for me to prepare for the challenges ahead was to take a breather.

The only thing that would have made these days better would have been partaking in a little bedtime delight, but I was a good boy. I had a goal that required resisting those urges, so I pulled through.

***

A full month of this passed, and the experiments came to an end before I knew it. They all went as smoothly as could be. As the experiments progressed, we switched from sending fruits to the other world to sending live animals. We sent progressively larger animals, with each one requiring readjustment after readjustment for the magic circle.

Eventually, we sent a horse, easily three times Nanahoshi's size, to the other world. We checked the results registered by the arch. It said that the horse was sent "to the other world on a landmass between ten and thirty meters above sea level."

A landmass ten to thirty meters above sea level. That was a target we were setting from our side. It wasn't like we could tell what nation's borders we sent the horse to from the residual mana. The only settings from this world's magic circles that we could apply to the other world were whether the destination was sea or land and how high up the destination was. Still, those settings alone really shrank the odds that you'd die the instant you made it over.

While we called it the "other" world, we didn't know if it was the same world Nanahoshi and I knew. Of course, we'd been summoning stuff like plastic bottles from there, so the probability was quite high. But that wasn't a guarantee. It was still possible that this other world was a completely different one that simply resembled the one we knew.

Even if it *were* our world, the vague setting of "landmass ten to thirty meters above sea level" still made it more likely than not the destination would be another country. What was more, the journey home would be on foot. If someone were teleported along with plenty of food, water, cold weather gear, and things they could exchange for money, then it was *possible* for them to reach Japan…but it'd be a brutal journey.

And yet, Nanahoshi seemed willing to try. Her mind had long since been made up.

Up next was the real deal. We were sending Nanahoshi herself. To give me time to rest up, we set the final date to three days from now.

***

Two days after the final experiment concluded, Nanahoshi came to my house.

“I want to take a bath at your place one last time,” she said. I figured that was just an excuse.

“Well, how about we have a going-away party while you’re over?”

“No, I’m fine.”

With that, Nanahoshi disappeared into the bathroom, alone.

I didn’t know what Nanahoshi wanted. Did she want a change of pace before the big day, or did she just want to say goodbye? Did she want one final night of passion to remember this world by? If so, perhaps I should barge into the bathroo—no, it definitely wasn’t that. That was just a fantasy provoked by my current abstinence. Sylphie would get pissed if I actually did it, too. Mara, begone!

I’d heard she’d said her goodbyes to all the people staying in Sharia, so it made sense for her to come here for the same reason. It was her final night in this world. She was choosing to spend it saying farewell to my family.

The least I could do was say a quiet word to Aisha and Lilia so they could whip up a feast worthy of this last night. Something potato heavy. Norn was coming home today as well, so as small a gesture as it might be, we were going to send her off with a smile on her face.

“Hey now! Get back here!”

“I dun wanna!”

That snapped me back to reality. While looking after Sieg with Sylphie, Lucie had hopped into the living room. Naked. And now, she had hopped on top of my lap.

“Daddy, help me!”

Guess I had a side quest on my hands.

A naked young lady, begging for rescue. To think my little Lucie had become such a wicked girl… Still, a man who’d refuse her would be no man at all. Stand behind me, miss! Be it a dragon god or a demon god, I’ll beat the crap out of whatever dares threaten you!

“Rudeus!”

The monster appeared: a demon god with red hair.

She was topless, too. Oh, no, abstinent Rudeus’s weakness. Critical hit! *My hopes of victory grow dim.*

“Rudeus, catch Lucie for me. She’s being fussy about taking a bath. Lucie, you were just saying you needed one after working up a sweat from sword practice!”

I caught Lucie.

My apologies, Lucie. You do have to take a bath after exercise.

“I dun wanna! Red Mommy’s too rough!”

“Rough? Eris… I know I can take it, but you shouldn’t be hitting the children.”

“Rude. Of course I wasn’t hitting them! Washing hair…isn’t my strong suit, that’s all.”

Aha. I looked back at Lucie. She was puffing her cheeks, complaining that Red Mama made her eyes hurt when she washed her hair.

It all made perfect sense now.

Sorry, Eris. I should have known that not even you would hit children.

“All right, Lucie. How about we finally teach you how to wash your hair all by yourself?”

“Daddy won’t… Okay…”

Lucie started to say something, but she stopped midway. She followed Eris back to the bathroom.

“Maybe she just wanted you to wash her, Rudy.”

“Yeah, maybe…”

But Nanahoshi was taking a bath right now, so I couldn’t possibly go in.

Wait.

That’s right, I hadn’t told Nanahoshi. Maybe there was still time to barge in… No, she probably knew. My house had a custom of letting groups into the bathroom since it was built. It was too late to complain about people barging in.

Roxy and Norn returned home sometime later, bringing Lara into the bath with them. Nanahoshi, Eris, and Lucie stepped out to give them some room. They emerged steaming hot. The long bath left them all bright red, too.

“Hey, Daddy! Miss Nanahoshi taught me how to wash my hair!”

“Did she now? Thank you, Nanahoshi.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Nanahoshi had taken care of Lucie. She must have been able to talk to Eris in there too. They seemed pretty relaxed around one another. Ah, baths truly are magnificent. Getting naked together is the first step to world peace.

Finally, Sylphie and I took Arus into the bath, and after washing up, it was time for dinner. Tonight’s menu was beef, vegetables, and rice. Also, potatoes. Potato chips and fries. The best kind of junk food.

Nanahoshi was a bit of a wallflower as compared to the chaos of my family, but she didn’t hesitate to chow down on the spuds.

Even though she could have all the potatoes she wanted when she got home. Potato girl had an appetite to be reckoned with.

“This food sure is delicious,” she remarked. She didn’t stop at potatoes; she also eagerly helped herself to the rice.

“They have rice in the flying fortress, don’t they?”

“Yeah, but this rice is tastier…maybe.”

“Is it, now.”

Our rice was Sharia-grown Aisha rice. Maybe I could change the brand name to “Hot Maid” or something. Ah, a virgin maid still in her teens tilling the rice paddies (using the beefy muscled-up men she hired) to create my own personal delicacy. What else could satisfy a Japanese appetite?

“Hey, now, this is the last of this world’s food you’ll be able to eat… Make sure to chew, okay?”

“Are you my mother or something?”

After snapping back, Nanahoshi ate in silence for a bit.

“…”

At some point, her gaze settled on not me, but my family. Lucie chattered animatedly about her recent escapades while Norn listened on. Roxy talked to Sylphie about everything related to magic circles. Eris fed Lara, Aisha fed Arus, and Lilia and Zenith watched over them.

It was a livelier sight than the old me could have ever imagined. Nanahoshi watched it all hungrily. It must have reminded her of her own family.

As I wondered about that, dinner drew to a close. Nanahoshi played with the children for a bit afterward. Lucie had warmed up to Nanahoshi quickly, probably because of their earlier naked hangout. Arus spent a little time burying his face in Nanahoshi’s breasts, and was grinning from cheek to cheek as a result. And Lara was…well, the same as ever.

“Nanahoshi, you should stay the night.”

At Sylphie’s suggestion, she stayed over. A natural end to the night. Unfortunately, our one-time guest bedroom was now full of kids. With no place for a guest to sleep, we eventually lent her Sylphie’s room.

***

That night, I talked with Nanahoshi. The house was quiet. Everyone else was sound asleep. We sat face to face in the living room, lit only by moonlight and the fireplace, as we sipped glasses of wine.

We kept it light. Perugius’s hobbies, how devoted Sylvaril was to Perugius, stuff like that. How Orsted and Perugius weren’t on great terms but seemed to acknowledge one another. Barely more than neighborhood gossip. In the middle of our light conversation, Nanahoshi shifted to something more serious.

“Rudeus, you’ve really grown into a fine man.”

“Have I?”

“You were like a grade-school kid when I first met you. The next time I saw you, you were sort of a middle-schooler. There was a time when I thought you were younger than me… But now, you’re a real adult. You’re married with kids and all that.”

“Come on, those things don’t make someone an adult.”

I didn’t really get all the “child” this and “adult” that stuff. I’d been an overgrown child in my last life, and I’d been fully grown.

“Yeah. But lately, you just seem like more of an adult than me.”

“Do I, now?”

“Yeah. You think about all this other stuff, like your children, your family… By comparison, I’ve hardly grown at all…”

“Now, that’s not true.”

Nanahoshi had changed plenty from how she used to be. Before she hadn’t let people get close to her. She was the invincible Silent Sevenstar.

“The old Nanahoshi wouldn’t have played with my kids.”

“Maybe… But part of that is because you helped me. Until then, I didn’t feel any urge to get involved with the people of this world.”

“Would you have looked after toddlers in your old world?”

“Hmm… Probably… No. I guess I’d have thought they were getting in the way of studying. Entrance exams were coming up at the time.”

Entrance exams and tests, huh? Those words had a nostalgic ring to them.

“I wonder how many years have passed over there…”

“Ugh, I don’t want to think about it…”

“Oh, sorry.”

It’d been about fifteen years since she came here. If fifteen years passed over there, it’d be like the Urashima Taro folktale. Maybe Nanahoshi would instantly age fifteen years the moment she teleported back.

“Honestly, I get the feeling that not a lot of time has passed over there.”

“Why’s that?”

I explained my tipsy reasoning to her.

“You and I got hit by that truck on the same day, right? But I got to this world nearly ten years earlier. Maybe time flows differently between here and there. You’ll be fine, I bet.”

“Huh. You think so?”

Nanahoshi looked for a moment like she was thinking about something.

“Wait… Hold on a second. What do you mean when you say we got hit by that truck on the same day?”

Oops.

“Are you saying you were there?”

“Uh, well…”

“Hold on. *Wait*. I need a minute…”

Nanahoshi pressed her fingers to her temple and closed her eyes, as though trying hard to remember. Suddenly, her face shot back up.

“That fatso.”

Ah, aaah… What have I done…?!

It must have been the alcohol. And after I’d been so careful all this time… Also, *rude!* Where do you get off calling someone a fatso? I mean, sure, I may have been fat, but…

“Whew, so that was it. That was you. To think that dude turned into Rudeus… Wait, so you actually turned out hot, huh?”

Nanahoshi put her hand to her chin as her eyes opened wide. Oh, dear. She was wide awake now. I thought she’d be disgusted, but now she seemed kind of happy.

“Um, pardon, Miss Nanahoshi… But uh, could you, well, keep this a secret from the others? I’d appreciate it.”

“Why’s that?”

“I mean… I don’t think anyone would stick with me if they knew.”

“I don’t think they all chose you for your looks, you know…”

“Still, I have stuff I’d rather keep secret.”

“Hmm… Fair enough.”

Nanahoshi reseated herself on the sofa. I wasn't sure if she really got it, or if she just worried that I might not cooperate tomorrow if she pressed the issue.

"Because unlike me, you're a *reincarnation*."

"Yeah."

That's right, I was a reincarnation. I couldn't go back to what I was before. I didn't intend to bury everything about my past, but I certainly wasn't going to talk about it if I didn't have to. Besides, my old self was embarrassing. Being that piece of crap in the past was what made me the person I was today, but that didn't make me proud of him.

"Got it. I'll keep it to myself."

"Thanks… Please do."

That reminded me of one more thing about my old life.

"That's right, I almost forgot."

"What is it?"

"Because you know my secret identity… Well, not *because* of that, but anyway—I'd like you to deliver this to my family in my old world."

With that, I placed a single envelope on the table. The somewhat bulky letter contained everything I had to say to my siblings.

It'd been twenty years since I'd come here. I'd been through a lot. I felt like I could hold my head high and say that I was different from the person I was then. Emphasis on "different," mind you. I wouldn't call myself respectable by any means. I'd packed the letter with apologies for my mistakes, memories of the times we shared, what I was doing now, and more. It might come off as gibberish if Nanahoshi landed right in Japan after less than a day had passed in that world, though…

Well. I could live with that. The letter wasn't just for them, it was also for me and what I needed to say.

"Understood," Nanahoshi said as she lovingly placed it in her pocket. "I'll make sure it gets there."

"Thanks, I'm counting on you."

There was no guarantee that she'd teleport to Japan, or make it back to Japan after teleporting. The journey could take years. My brothers could have moved for all we knew and be impossible to find.

She nodded despite those uncertainties.

"Also, this," I said, handing her one more letter, far thinner than the one before. "Just in case years have passed in that world, and if you have nowhere to go and nobody to rely on…I wrote this letter to tell my old brothers to look after you. Even if it's just for a little bit."

“…!”

Nanahoshi accepted this letter with shaky hands.

“But I couldn’t…”

“Well, hey, I was nothing but a nuisance over there, so they might just refuse you outright…but you know.”

“You were a nuisance?”

“Yep, a jobless leech.”

Might as well hear it from me. If she did meet my brothers, they’d let her know.

Nanahoshi looked deep into my face as if she were inspecting it for signs I was a loser. “Kinda hard to believe that.”

Maybe that disbelief was proof of just how hard I’d worked. Wasn’t that a happy thought?

“Well, if you’re offering, I’d be honored to accept,” Nanahoshi said, cradling the letter to her chest and bowing her head. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done.”

Nanahoshi would be returning home tomorrow.

The experiments had gone perfectly. There wasn’t the slightest error in that magic circle. But even still, an anxiety coiled around my insides that I couldn’t shake.

We’d made every possible preparation, made every calculation we could. Nanahoshi seemed confident. Not a soul thought it would fail.

There was still one last cause for concern. One that I had no intention of spreading further by daring to name aloud. One that, in her heart, Nanahoshi surely knew herself. One that, if she did know, she also wouldn’t speak about. Maybe she already had it under control.

So, I left it at that.

“Tomorrow…let’s get you home.”

“Yeah.”

If your convictions were strong enough, everything else is just details.

Chapter 6:
Nanahoshi's Fate

IT WAS FINALLY THE DAY for Nanahoshi to return home.

The only others present in the Hall of Teleportation were Perugius and me. Nanahoshi insisted she didn't want a crowd here to see her off. She said she'd already bid her farewells, so she must have seen them exactly the way she wanted to remember them.

Our formation was the same as before; I was the mana tank powering everything while Perugius and his spirits directed and maintained the flow. Nanahoshi stood at the center of the magic circle. She faced me, dressed in traveling attire with an enormous rucksack on her back. It was stuffed with a vast array of items to prepare her for what she might find on the other side. Neither one of us had ever ventured outside the borders of Japan before coming here. That was why she'd also packed some items she could trade for local currency no matter where she ended up, along with her ID, magic crystals, and scrolls. Who knows if those last two things would work where she was going?

All she could do now was rely on her wits and courage to get her through the rest.

Nanahoshi and I traded last glances. We said nothing. Whatever words needed to be spoken had been spoken last night.

"Rudeus!" Perugius bellowed, his voice booming through the room. "Are you prepared?!"

It felt more like a command than a question. I pressed my hands to the teleportation apparatus. Same routine, no changes. I had practiced this numerous times by now. I couldn't claim that they had all been successful, but whenever we failed, we located the issue and refined the process so that the mistake wouldn't happen again. Perugius and I were veterans at this.

Okay, let's not go overboard. I'm just the battery here.

"Ready," I said.

"Nanahoshi, I assume you are prepared?" Perugius asked, his booming voice once again rendering the question more of an imperative.

Nanahoshi nodded. "Yes, Lord Perugius. Thank you for everything!"

"Your gratitude is unnecessary. You've taught me a few amusing trifles."

Their parting words were short and succinct, and once finished, they tore their gazes away from one another. Nanahoshi directed her attention back toward me, and Perugius directed his subordinates with his eyes.

"Very well. Let us begin," he said.

With his signal, the apparatus began to power up. The process was exactly as it always had been. Perugius and the rest of his spirits pressed their hands to the magic circle. Once the edges began to glow, I began pouring my mana into it. It eagerly gulped up the power I offered, but I was used to that sensation by now. The circle responded by glowing brighter and brighter, cycling through an array of colors—first blue, then green, then white. Blinding though it was, I forced myself to keep focus, to ensure I made no mistakes as I supplied it with mana.

My experience during the experiments came in handy here. I knew the intervals when it needed power by heart. I was careful to ensure a sustained, constant flow of mana with no dearth or excess.

Exactly as before, the circle's glow turned black—wait, what? *Hold up just a sec. Did we ever have it turn black before? I've got a real bad feeling about this.*

"Rudeus!" Perugius barked at me.

The black glow was growing more pronounced by the second. I was worried whether we should continue this or not. But since I

wasn’t in control of this thing, I had no way of making that call.

“Lord Perugius! Your orders!” I demanded.

“More mana!”

I obeyed his command and forced even more power through hands. It was no longer a flow—it was a flood. Strength fled my legs, my vision blurred.

In spite of my best efforts, the blackness refused to fade. Instead, I felt something threatening to spill out—the sensation crawling up through my fingers, hands, and arms. It was a dreadful, entirely new sensation.

This can’t be good, I thought. Could I make the call to shut this thing down? After all, Perugius had ordered me to give it more power. I needed to have faith in him and—

Snap!

A sound echoed around us. The light from the magic circle faded immediately, as if a breaker had popped and the power had gone out. It was so instantaneous that it struck me as odd. Normally if something went wrong, it was a gradual ebb as the circle lost power. This was different. It was almost like something had sucked out all the mana from it before extinguishing.

My lips thinned.

Not all the light in the room had faded. The candle stands positioned at each corner of the room still had a flame dancing on each of their wicks. A deafening silence that enveloped the room. It reminded me of a computer with its power suddenly cut. And sadly, plain as anything, Nanahoshi stood inert at the center of the circle.

Everyone was flabbergasted, me included. I couldn’t see the spirits’ expressions beneath their masks, but the air of confusion hung heavily.

“Why!” Perugius howled. “Why, Rudeus Greyrat!”

“Huh?”

Me? What'd I do?

"Why did you cut off your supply of mana?!"

Cut off? What's he talking about? I blinked at him. "I gave it power just like I was supposed to."

"But then why would…" His voice trailed off, but I could guess what he was trying to ask. *Why would the magic powering it suddenly disappear?*

Emphatically, I hadn't cut off the supply of mana. I had increased it, in fact. I was as confused as they were. Had something gone haywire with me, and the power stopped flowing from my hands like it was supposed to? It was hard to believe that could be possible, considering the immense fatigue I was now fighting—the same kind that I always dealt with when I used a vast amount of mana.

"If the supply of mana had been cut off, then the circle should have lost power the moment that happened," I reasoned aloud.

Perugius nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, true. It did have mana. Why was it not fed to us? It was almost as though someone else interfered and harnessed the circle…"

I inspected the circle. There was a small fissure in the pattern. Had some sort of insect managed to disrupt the structure, causing it to short-circuit?

"Grr…" Perugius growled under his breath. He cupped his chin as he contemplated the meaning of it all.

Nanahoshi silently stepped out of the circle. Peeling the straps of her backpack from her shoulder, she lay the heavy load on the floor. Then she walked stiffly toward the door, leaving the Hall of Teleportation entirely.

I glanced at Perugius. He was still lost in thought. His servants were listless.

What now? I also wanted to know the cause of this failure, but… *Nah, leave this to Perugius.*

I hurried after Nanahoshi.

***

Nanahoshi was in her room, sitting on her bed. Her shoulders were slumped, her head hung. It was hard to make out her expression with her face turned downward. The atmosphere radiated exhaustion and resignation.

In stark contrast, I wasn't all that shocked. I couldn't shake what my future self had once told me—that in the end, it would fail. I had no way of telling whether this was the failure he referred to or if there was another one still awaiting us further down the road. Part of me wished I had asked him more about it so I would know, but there was little point in lamenting it at the moment.

My future self also told me about how I'd failed to comfort Nanahoshi in that moment. *What happened to her after that?* My older counterpart had tip-toed around a direct answer, which seemed to indicate it was a wretched ending. *Just like this.*

I *had* to do a solid job of comforting Nanahoshi this time. The problem was…how? I could say, "Everyone experiences failure. Let's put it aside and hope for a better result next time." Hm, too cliche. Sounds like the sort of thing my future counterpart probably said.

Or maybe not, I thought, reminding myself, *he was so shattered after what happened to Roxy, he might not have managed anything like that.* It was possible he instead said something much worse, driving Nanahoshi even further into despair.

From what I knew of my future self, he seemed like enough of a degenerate that I couldn't rule out the possibility he exploited her vulnerability. Maybe he'd said, "If you can't go home anyway, then be my woman!"

Kinda wish I knew what screwup my future self pulled. Then I'd have some *idea what to do.* No, I needed to think about this myself.

There was a wrong option here, and I had a burning curiosity about what it might be. Life wasn't normally like that—it wasn't a video game. I had to find my own words to console her with.

I racked my brain. *Uh, how do I normally go about this?* The first thing that came to mind was when I consoled Sylphie. *Right! That's it, first I take a seat beside her. Then I wrap an arm around her shoulders…*

"Is that how you seduced those three?" Nanahoshi interrupted. She lifted her head and gave me a hard stare.

Oh. Guess she has a point. This is kinda sexual, huh.

"My bad." I hastily removed the hand that'd been hovering right above her shoulder, ready to pat it. She'd cut me off before I could even make eye contact. I folded my hands in my lap. "So, um, Madam Nanahoshi. If you would permit me a moment of your splendid attention?"

"What? I'm busy."

"Come on, don't be like that," I said. "When you feel like you're all alone in the world, it's important not to bottle it up. You'll feel better. It won't fix the problem, sure, but it can put you in a better mindset to tackle the problem more effectively once you're ready to…"

My voice trailed off as I glanced at her and noticed she had a notebook spread out on her lap. Japanese was scrawled on the pages. At the top, it read: *Tentative Theories About Why the Teleportation Failed at the Final Stage.*

"It's a good thing you told me ahead of time about this failure," Nanahoshi said as she traced the Japanese characters on the page with her finger. "If I didn't know, my first assumption might have been that there was something wrong with the magic circle itself." She lifted her gaze from the book. There was no trace of despair in her expression. Maybe I was wrong about the exhaustion and resignation. She had already mentally prepared herself for the possibility of failure.

So… I guess that means I don't need to console her? I mean, I'm sure she's still gotta be crushed that it didn't work out. While I was lost in thought, she glanced down at her notebook again.

"Hey. Do you remember when I talked to you before about my theory on how all of this happened?"

Theory. Theory… Kinda rings a bell, doesn't it? Pretty sure it was something far out and wild, but I don't quite remember it.

After mulling it over for a moment, I shook my head. "Sorry, mind giving me a refresher?"

Again, she gave me that cold judgmental look.

Jeez, sorry.

"Fine, but I'm only going to summarize…" With that preface, she began to launch into her explanation, which was essentially her reading straight from the notes in her book. "First of all, the Fittoa Displacement Incident which resulted when I was summoned here should never have happened originally. That raises the question: why would something so irregular have occurred? When I heard that your future self had traveled back through time to speak to you, I deduced that someone in the future must have sent me here, to the past. No—since I'm not originally from this world, perhaps it'd be more correct to say the person responsible *placed* me in *their* past.

"History changed the moment someone who should never have existed suddenly appeared out of thin air. Like dropping a rock into a tub already filled to the brim with water, my presence displaced the total amount of mana in the world, and as a consequence, the Fittoa Region was wiped from existence."

Oh, yeah. This sounds familiar. I think I was so preoccupied with other stuff at the time that I didn't really pay attention. It was still an absurd theory, to be sure. But if she was so focused, then it seemed she really wasn't hung up over the teleportation failing. *Nah, she's gotta be torn up. This whole nonsense spiel is probably her just trying to distract herself. Guess I should humor her.*

“Do you follow me so far?” Nanahoshi asked.

“Yeah.”

She flipped a page in her notebook. This time, the line at the top read: *Who Would Do This and Why?*

“This is the crux of the issue here,” she said, tapping the page. “I theorized someone from the future wanted to change the past, right? You might be wondering why I suspect it is someone from the future. Orsted himself is the clue. He was sent from the past to the present, where he keeps reliving the same period over and over in a loop. At present, there isn’t a soul who can interfere with him, which makes him the most powerful of all—able to continue the same loop again and again until at last, he achieves victory.”

Orsted was sent by his father, the first Dragon God, who also cast a secret art on him that causes him to relive the exact same span of time—just as Nanahoshi described. According to Orsted’s own prediction, there was only one way to escape this loop: to defeat the Man God. He had yet to bring down the Man God, but he would someday. Nanahoshi wasn’t exaggerating when she called him the most powerful.

She continued, “It is my belief that the reason we were both sent here has something to do with the battle between the Dragon God and the Man God.”

“How come?”

“Because the first person I met after I found myself in this world was Orsted. I met you after that, and you greatly changed the course of Orsted’s fate. Unlike the other people here, you and I can and *are* interfering with his loop.”

Right, let me make sure I’ve got this straight…

Orsted was stuck in these loops so that he could defeat the Man God. I had no idea which of the two would come out on top, but for argument’s sake, let’s assume the losing side found some way to alter the past. If we were to also hypothesize that they had sent

Nanahoshi and myself as a strategic move to skip the scales so that they would achieve victory…then which one lost originally?

It has to be Orsted, I reasoned to myself. *He's the one still caught in these loops.* That meant there was a possibility that the Orsted of the future had called us here.

"But it's not Orsted," Nanahoshi said, as if reading where my thoughts were going. "He couldn't do something like this."

She had a point; Orsted's intention was to win without making any changes to the past. Even if he were to make alterations to the past, he'd be more likely to choose a period further back in history. For instance, the second Great Human-Demon War, when Laplace was split into two. It was also possible that an Orsted who'd experienced many more loops would interfere with a version of himself in a past loop. But I couldn't think of a reason why he'd bother to do that.

Nanahoshi went on, "The Man-God couldn't either. As Orsted said himself, the Man-God was already supposed to win this loop."

Orsted had never known about Geese's existence until now. Thus, he'd thought victory was close at hand. He had no way of knowing that he would stumble over a seemingly insignificant pebble along the way. If not for our presence in this loop, his defeat would have been assured already. That was further proof that the Man-God had no incentive to change the past.

"Then who would do this? And why?" I asked.

"That's the question, isn't it? I have to preface what I am about to say next by admitting this is only conjecture on my part, but…" Again, she tapped her finger on the book, pointing to a name that was written on the page. *Shinohara Akito.* Immediately below that was the name *Kuroki Seiji*, but she had crossed it out, penning yet another name beside it—*Rudeus Greyrat.*

"Yesterday, when I learned your true identity, I remembered something. When the accident happened, Aki—Shinohara that is—wrapped his arms around me. You saved Kuroki Seiji, so he was

outside the truck's path. I suspect he probably wasn't sent here. There were only three of us that were hit in the collision. And two of us are here together right now. The last remaining person is nowhere to be found.

"You appeared in this world ten years before I did. I have to think that means the three of us were sent to different time periods here."

Well, to be more precise, I was reincarnated, not sent. Not that it makes that big of a difference, I guess.

"And if you came here before I did, then there would be nothing off if Shinohara came here at an even later date. Much, much further into the future, where he met Orsted. Let's suppose that was the first time anything had ever changed in that Orsted's loops, and that he and Shinohara became companions. However, Orsted realized afterward that he had no way of defeating the Man God. So he took other steps to ensure his victory."

Thus, someone from the future changing the past, huh?

"Wait," I interjected, "you're saying that this has to do with why the Fittoa Region was totally obliterated? Because this Shinohara guy is some kind of esper with super abilities that allows him to change the past?"

"No, nothing like that. But I do think he would have met a number of different people, just as I have. It wouldn't be strange for him to have found someone who *can* alter the course of history…" Her voice trailed off.

A Blessed Child. The words immediately popped into my head. It never occurred to me when I saw Zanoba's superhuman strength, but the Blessed Child in Millis could see into a person's memories simply by looking into their eyes. It didn't seem terribly farfetched to assume there could be a Blessed Child out there with the ability to alter the past in some way. Heck, if I hadn't met my future self, I would have probably lived the miserable life detailed in his diary. Didn't that mean the past had already been changed once already?

It didn't feel real to me that such a thing was possible, but on the other hand, I couldn't rule it out. After all, I had somehow reincarnated here and Nanahoshi had been sent here from our world. Was altering the past so farfetched in comparison?

I stroked my chin in thought. "Did Orsted say he had any clues about who this person could be?"

"Yes, he did. He said there's a Blessed Child who can reverse the time of an object."

That wasn't quite what I had in mind when I asked the question, but it fit with Nanahoshi's theory about a Blessed Child with time manipulation abilities.

"However," Nanahoshi went on, "he also said that Blessed Child's fate was so much weaker than anyone else's that they died without ever being able to do anything."

"And you think Shinohara Akito stepped in and saved them," I guessed.

It felt like the puzzle pieces she had given me were starting to click into place. This Shinohara guy would have met with the Blessed Child as well as Orsted. We could infer, then, they had somehow developed a magical implement which allowed them to extend the parameters of this Blessed Child's powers. That would make the most sense, given it aligned with our own experiences; Nanahoshi had collaborated with Perugius to create an even more powerful teleportation apparatus. Likewise, I had met Cliff and Zanoba, and we had created my Magic Armor. We could then assume that, with the aid of this magical implement, they'd managed to alter the past.

None of this answered the real question. So, I had to ask… "What's that got to do with your teleportation failing?"

"I was hoping you would ask that." Nanahoshi turned to the next page. This time, the top was headlined with the words: *My Future, Assuming I'm Unable to Return Home*.

“I thought to myself, wouldn’t he have searched for me just as I’ve searched for him?”

I whistled low and nodded. Seemed logical enough.

“Well, this is again only supposition on my part, but what if the reason I can’t return home in the present is because I return home with Shinohara Akito in the future? Or rather, what if there’s a stipulation to me being able to return? Like, I have to meet some condition, or fulfill some purpose before I can leave. Maybe both are true, even.”

Okay, so… Hold up a sec. I’ve gotta make sure I’m following.

The basic gist was that, for some reason or another, this Shinohara guy was summoned here into what would be our future. One thing or another happened, and he became companions with Orsted, and the two worked together. They learned that, as things stood, they couldn’t beat the Man-God. When they tried to look into the root of the problem, the cause was in their past. So they found a way to extend the range of that Blessed Child’s abilities to alter the past.

That’s when I was initially summoned here. Except, the moment I appeared, the Man-God foresaw his own death at the hands of my descendant. With their help, Shinohara and Orsted were able to finally take him down. However, there was a problem: Shinohara had no way of returning home to his world. Thus, he once again used the Blessed Child’s powers. This time, he summoned Nanahoshi to the past, knowing how fiercely she would want to return home. Her passion for going back spurred her to invent better teleportation circles.

I could only guess that when they summoned her, perhaps they were a bit too reckless in how they altered the past, thus destroying the Fittoa Region. That thought alone made me furious with this Shinohara guy. If everything Nanahoshi supposed was true, he had destroyed that land and countless lives out of his own selfishness.

Of course, this was all speculation. *Still, I guess I can't blame the guy, can I?* Perhaps Shinohara was so out of options that he had no other choice than to alter the past like that. Or maybe he had no way of knowing how dire the repercussions would be. The most terrifying possibility was that circumstances were so drastic that he made the call in spite of the cost.

I could relate to that. Since coming here, I had made so many precious connections to other people. To my wives, to my children, even to my little sisters. I was willing to become Orsted's underling just to protect them. Fortunately for me, Orsted turned out to be a surprisingly good guy. What if he had been rotten? What if he'd ordered me to carry out the most heinous acts? I knew in my heart I would've followed his commands regardless. I would do anything to protect my family. Maybe Shinohara and I were no different on that front. Everyone had something that was precious to them.

"I get it," I said, after organizing my thoughts. "So then, Nanahoshi, let's assume all of your suppositions are correct. What are you going to do?"

"Good question…" She paused for a moment and then said, "Assuming that the condition is for me to make something before I can return home, I think I have already fulfilled my role. I created the teleportation apparatus. I have no intention of creating anything else."

If Nanahoshi's role was to create the teleportation apparatus, then what was my role supposed to be? To lead Orsted to victory? Maybe everything hinged on me killing Geese? *Could be I'm only thinking that because he's weighing so heavily on my mind in the first place.* Geese might not be the only hidden disciple.

Nanahoshi continued, "Having said that, the fact that I couldn't go home must mean there's still something left for me to do."

"Right."

"And while I realize this is hopeful thinking on my part, I wonder if my final task is to send the Shinohara in the future back home."

“Wait. What?” She lost me there.

“I mean, that has to be it, right?” Nanahoshi insisted. “I made the apparatus, but if he doesn’t know how to use it, then he won’t be able to return.”

Okay, yeah, I think I follow. Even if we do assume he has some kinda mana tank like me in the future to help, just having the installation itself won’t be enough to actually get it to work. There’s a good chance Perugius won’t be alive anymore by then. I could see what she was getting at, but this whole hypothetical scenario seemed a little too neat. The problem could be easily solved by Nanahoshi penning and leaving a manual which he could then use in the future.

“Or maybe, I’m already in the future,” Nanahoshi said.

Aha, that makes more sense. She couldn’t return home because it would create a time paradox. If she returned now, then her future self wouldn’t be able to exist. And if her future self had helped perpetuate the change in the past, then her future self’s actions and existence would take priority over whatever her past self attempted to do. That would explain why the teleportation installation just abruptly ceased working with no real cause or reason.

Nanahoshi shook her head. “But at the rate things are going, I won’t live another eighty years to see that future. I have this disease I am dealing with, after all.” Her eyes fixed on the corner of the room as she spoke.

I had a bad habit of letting it slip my mind, but her words were a grim reminder of the fact that she was still afflicted by Dryne Syndrome. It was almost like the AIDS of this world. Nanahoshi managed her symptoms by drinking Sokas Grass daily. There was no telling when the disease might progress to something more unmanageable. The chances of her surviving for eight more years were quite slim.

“What are you going to do?” I asked, not for the first time in this conversation.

Nanahoshi sucked in a breath and said, “I’m going to ask Perugius to freeze me in time.”

She was referring to one of Perugius’s spirits—Scarecoat of Time, whose touch was capable of freezing someone in time. If she used Scarecoat’s power, she could survive those long years. It wouldn’t be indefinite; at some point, Laplace would revive and Perugius would launch a full-scale assault to take him down. He wouldn’t have the luxury of wasting a precious resource like Scarecoat when that happened. If everything lined up, it would be eight years from now. Fifty at the most. Orsted would need to take Laplace down as well if he was going to make it to the Man-God. Shinohara would be there to assist with that, which would mean… Nanahoshi would wake up at just the right point in time.

“I’ve made up my mind, Rudeus. I have one last request to make of you.”

I tilted my head. “A request, huh?” *Wonder what it could be.*

“I want you to take some kind of measure to ensure my existence doesn’t escape Shinohara Akito’s attention. Write about me in a book or erect a monument to me—whatever works. Also, while I know teleportation circles have been forbidden in this world, I would like you to make them public if possible. Continue to research them.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“There’s no guarantee all of the suppositions I’ve made are correct. In fact, it’d be odd if all of them were. Best to assume eighty percent of what I said is nothing but fantasy and take out insurance. That way if everything I’ve said is wrong, I’ll still be able to find a way back home when I wake up.”

She’d worn away my skepticism with her rock-solid logic. I wouldn’t sweat about it being totally accurate, but it made perfect sense. Now, once again using perfect reasoning, she was swaying me toward acting as if none of it were certain. We didn’t even know if Shinohara *had* been sent to this world like us. Maybe she was wrong

and the magic circle just had some flaw in the design. We had reached the highest level of perfection we could manage at this current point in time, but it was perfectly conceivable that there was still something missing—something we wouldn't be able to overcome without a breakthrough.

"Of course, I still intend to wake several times each year to get an update on present circumstances," Nanahoshi said. "I am sure things will change while I am…asleep, for lack of a better word, and I may ask you to change tactics at that point."

Situations did tend to change, after all. Some new information might refute the premise of her thesis entirely.

Besides, I thought, *as long as I still draw breath, I want to do whatever I can to see her home. There's nobody else I'd trust with that letter to my family.*

"All right," I said.

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After our conversation, we carefully scrutinized the teleportation apparatus to be absolutely sure there were no issues with it and made one more attempt to send Nanahoshi back to her world. We confirmed everything was as it should be. There were no issues with the apparatus, everything went beautifully…but we failed, nevertheless. It was as though someone was shutting off my mana supply to the apparatus to interfere with our attempt.

I could at least confirm that there were no issues on my end, assuming Perugius was being entirely honest. The only guess I could make was that the interference was coming from someone in the future. I couldn't imagine how it could be the Man-God's doing. Whatever the underlying cause, our mission to send Nanahoshi back ended in failure, and that was that.

It was then that Nanahoshi informed Perugius of her plan. I thought he would oppose her decision, but he accepted it quite readily. When she implored him to lend her Scarecoat of Time so she could fall into a deep sleep, there was a momentary flicker of sorrow on his face that smoothed over so quickly it almost made me sad. Once it was gone, he merely muttered, “If that is what you wish.”

It occurred to me that she may have already discussed this possibility with him and made arrangements.

“Well then, Rudeus, Lord Perugius, I leave everything in your capable hands,” Nanahoshi announced before disappearing to her room.

Her plan was to only awaken when Scarecoat’s mana ran out, which would be about once a month. Considering how estranged we had grown over the past few years, no terrible sorrow gripped me at the thought of her absence. For me, it was more like a friend moving far away. I did feel something else, though.

What is this? It makes me feel kind of uneasy.

“Rudeus Greyrat,” Perugius called out, stopping me as I was about to leave the floating fortress, still struggling with my own inner turmoil over this outcome. “I detest the word ‘fate.’”

That seemed sudden and out of nowhere. I soon nodded and said, “Me too.” I didn’t want to think that everything we had accomplished was simply us following someone else’s plan.

“It’s detestable to think that the future clenches its fists around the past. I can scarcely stomach it.” He shot a spiteful look at the door that Nanahoshi had disappeared through moments earlier. “That belief shows scorn for the past and contempt for the present. I refuse to accept it.”

“For having such a strong opinion on the matter, you sure didn’t throw a fit about lending Nanahoshi one of your subordinates,” I said.

“Hmph,” he grunted. The lines of his face hardened as he scrutinized me. “It is my belief that there was something lacking with the circle itself.”

I pursed my lips and refused to comment.

“Nanahoshi seems to have abandoned hope, but I shall not. While she is trapped in a deep sleep, I shall see this magic circle completed—this I swear on my name as the Armored Dragon King.” A fiery determination shone through his dark eyes. “Unfortunately, I lack the substantial mana pool you possess. Thus, Rudeus Greyrat, I shall have you lend me your assistance in this endeavor.”

“I don’t mind helping out. I have to ask, though: Why do you go to such great lengths to support Nanahoshi?”

My question seemed to bring him back to his senses. His expression shifted, and his eyes unfocused, gazing into the far distance. It was as if he himself didn’t know why he was doing this. After a few moments, his brows drew together, indicating that he had some notion as to his own motivations after all.

“To the past, our present is the future. Our past selves brought us to where we are today, and our current selves will continue to build our future. I desire to enlighten my apprentice by showing her the error in her foolish thinking. That is all. I am only idling my time until Laplace’s revival,” Perugius said.

Foolish, huh? Perhaps, from his perspective, Nanahoshi looked like a petulant child sulking because she didn’t get her way. Maybe he thought she was under the illusion that if she just went into deep sleep and woke up later on, something might magically change and solve all her problems for her. He wanted to refute that.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll help out, then.”

“You have my gratitude.”

“No need for that.” I flashed a smile at him, pleased at this little interaction.

Nanahoshi probably wouldn't return to Japan in my lifetime. However, even if she was never able to go back, at least she had someone to look after her. That warmed my heart.

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And thus, Nanahoshi went into a deep and dreamless sleep to await the future. I was left with an uncomfortable tangle of emotions that was hard to tease out. Part of me was relieved that we'd reached an ending. Another part grieved for the same reason.

I wondered if Nanahoshi would have reached this conclusion with or without my involvement. Thinking back on it, my future self had never told me what her fate was. He only danced around the topic with a sorrowful look on his face. I suspected, based on what information I had, that Nanahoshi had never shared her conjecture with him. Perhaps Perugius later told him that she committed suicide, but it was possible that was a front—that she had actually gone into slumber to await the future just as she had this time.

Regardless, this brought one matter to a close at least. Perugius seemed intent on continuing his research, and Nanahoshi seemed equally intent to continue her journey home in the future. For the moment, this was over. Nanahoshi had given the matter consideration and chosen her own path. It was time for me to shift gears and go back to focusing on my role in this.

All right! With that settled, it's time to head off to see the Sword God, Gall Falion. Eris and I can go together, just the two of us. Best to keep things simple. It did make me a little uneasy to think we would have no back-up, but from what I'd heard, no one in the Sword Sanctum was particularly bright. Taking someone who was an expert at speaking with her fists was the safest option.

Before I took off, I needed to give Orsted my regular report. I wanted to tell him about Nanahoshi's choice. She'd already told him her theory, but I still needed to give him the final wrap-up.

I made my way straight to Orsted's office.

"Oh, Chairman Rudeus! A pleasure to see you, sir," greeted the cheerful receptionist with a bow of the head as soon as I entered the lobby. "The CEO is waiting inside."

"All right," I said, not missing a beat as I strolled past her and headed for his office. When I entered, I made sure to politely close the door behind me before turning back to face him. I had my legs perfectly positioned, a shoulder's width apart, and my arms folded behind me as I stood in front of Orsted, who was seated at his desk. I lowered my head as a show of respect. "I have a report to give you, sir."

"Very well."

"Nanahoshi's attempt to return to her world ended in failure. She believes the cause lies in the future. She has employed the power of Perugius's subordinate, Scarecoat of Time, to fall into suspended animation."

"I see." Orsted slowly pulled his helmet off, then pressed his hand to his temple, breathing out a long sigh. "And what did Perugius say?"

"He insisted that the failure had to be due to some inadequacy in the circle itself. He is determined to continue improving it so that he can see Nanahoshi home."

He stared at me. "Is that all?"

"Perugius also said that it was absurd for the past to be determined by what takes place in the future."

"Of course he did. He would say that." Perhaps it was my imagination, but his voice was unusually full of emotion. *Although his expression is just as implacable and his tone just as flat as ever.*

"Now that I have heard about Nanahoshi, what do you plan to do?" Orsted asked.

"I'll give it some more thought, but my present plan is to go to see Sword God Gall Falion. As always, I would appreciate as many

details as you can provide.”

“Very well. I have already compiled my knowledge on the man.” He reached into his cabinet and produced a bundle of documents. He was well prepared, as ever. While I appreciated his thoroughness, I got the feeling our roles were kinda reversed here. Wasn’t I supposed to be the one providing such materials, since I was his subordinate? *Not that it matters. We’ve come this far doing things this way. Not like it’s gonna change now.*

“Thank you, sir. I will gladly make use of them.”

“I wrote in here as well, but just for emphasis—avoid fighting Gall Falion.”

“Yes, sir.”

While one curtain closed on Nanahoshi’s story as she sunk into her torpor, another opened. My somewhat bizarre break came to an end. It was time for me to resume my battle with Geese.

Chapter 7:
The Mad Dog's Old Stomping Grounds

IT FELT LIKE AN ETERNITY before I finally arrived at the Sword Sanctum, a bitterly cold place eternally blanketed with snow. Even amid the vast swath of land that made up the Northern Territories, this place was unique.

By any traveler's first impression, it was a normal town; there were houses made of stone, columns of smoke sprouting from their chimneys, and the enticing scent of dinners roasting over the fire filling the air. The people were all bundled up warmly, though they still shivered from the subzero temperatures as they went about their business. These were typical sights here in the north.

It was only once one traveled past the little town that they would discover the sword training hall. Its grounds were more extensive than any found in Asura Kingdom. From here rang the endless echoes of wooden swords clapping against one another. Here was where the leading pupils of the Sword God Style gathered to practice their art—and it was this which earned it the name Sword Sanctum.

Swordsmen the world over traveled far to make their way here. When, at last, they dragged their tired feet the final few steps to their destination, no doubt they thought, *Ah… At last. I have arrived.* Once they had finished their long apprenticeship in these halls, they would look back at the sight I was gazing upon right this very moment and think to themselves, *And now my real journey begins.*

—EXCERPT FROM *WANDERING THE WORLD* BY THE ADVENTURER BLOODY KANT

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ERIS AND RUDEUS had made their way to the Sword Sanctum.

“I remember the Sword Sanctum showing up at the end of *Wandering the World*. That must mean it was the very last place Bloody Kant visited. The way the land here was described was way different from the other places in the book. That really stuck out to me,” Rudeus chatted absentmindedly, his face devoid of emotion as he strolled along. Eris could tell immediately, however, that he had his guard up. “Guess you walked around this area regularly when you were training here, huh?”

Eris cast her gaze about their surroundings. Thinking back on it now, she didn’t actually visit the town too often when she lived here. She dropped in a couple of times at the Sword God’s bidding, but she wasn’t the leisurely stroll type.

“I didn’t have time for that,” she said gruffly.

The town here looked to her like any of the others in the Northern Territories. Given the size and population, it was more accurate to call the place a village rather than a town. When she lived in Roa, back when everything felt new, she often wandered around. The same was true when she moved to Sharia and took up the daily habit of going for walks with Leo. This town, however, inspired no urge to roam in her. This simply wasn’t the place for it, at least not in her mind.

“There sure are a lot of smithies and weapon shops,” Rudeus mumbled.

“Yeah.”

The only people who bothered to take up residence here were swordsmen. Regardless of age or gender, most people here had a sword at their hip. That wasn’t to say each and every one of them were practitioners of the Sword God Style, but it was still common practice for the townspeople to be armed.

“Watch where you’re goin’, would ya?!”

“What’s that? You ain’t even worth payin’ any attention to.”

“So you wanna settle this with swords, huh?!”

A squabble had broken out in the middle of the street. Two people had whipped out their blades and were glaring daggers at one another. A second later, they each made their attacks. Those around them spared barely a glance before shuffling away, as if they were all too used to the sight. No cheers, no jeers. Routine.

Eris could tell neither combatant was particularly skilled. They were probably Intermediate-tier at best. Their postures were abysmal and they jerked clumsily, heavily as they smashed their blades together. One quick glance told her neither had the intention of taking the other’s life.

“What the…” Rudeus gawped, his whole body trembling. He fell a step behind Eris, as if trying to hide behind her. He looked like he’d been dropped somewhere in Johannesburg.

“Stand up straight and walk properly,” Eris barked at him.

Rudeus would have no problem taking those two out—or anyone else around, for that matter. Eris knew that his magic was faster than an average swordsman, even at close range. Besides, Rudeus was Intermediate-tier in swordsmanship himself. Perhaps that kept him humble. He was currently wearing such heavy armor that he would find it difficult to inflict harm on even the most trivial swordsman. If a close range battle were unavoidable, he’d choose evasion over going on the offensive. He wouldn’t take the gamble of seeing who could move fastest.

“It’s just…I don’t want to get into it with anyone,” Rudeus explained. “Getting into spats like that will only have a bad effect on later negotiations. Times like this, it’s almost a guarantee that I lure in unsavory sorts who want to pick a fight. I want to avoid a mess like that as much as possible.”

“You will be fine.”

He glanced at her. “You think?”

“These guys are chumps,” Eris said. “You can take them.”

“That’s…not what I meant.”

It was at that moment that Eris sensed ill intent in the area. She jerked her head around to face the direction it was coming from. Rudeus followed her gaze.

“Oh, crap,” he squeaked out, averting his eyes. “See? People overhear you and then this happens…”

A man was standing there, glowering murderously at Eris. The veins on his forehead protruded with his anger. “Hey there, girly. Those are fighting words.” As he spoke, he started toward her. It was only once Eris fixed him with a death glare that he froze and sucked in a breath. The color rapidly drained from his face. He tore his gaze away from her, and the rest of his body soon followed.

“Hmph!” Eris sniffed at him.

The man surely heard her, but he must have been awash with relief. One step further and she would have taken off his head. He could sense it.

“See?” Eris said.

“I think your intimidating presence drove him off.” His eyes sparkled like an awestruck maiden swooning over her husband’s manly display of strength.

In the past, Eris would have grunted triumphantly, but she knew now that there was no pride to be felt in terrifying small fries like that. He was insignificant. Rudeus could have easily taken him.

“Hey, look over there.”

“That red hair… That’s the Berserker Sword King, right?”

“So, she’s back.”

“Whatever you do, don’t meet her eyes.”

“Keep your voice down too. Try to keep as quiet as possible. You’ll set her off if you don’t…”

“Yeah. She doesn’t need a reason—she’ll go after you for nothing.”

Murmurs filled the air.

“Eris,” Rudeus said in a whisper, “what did you *do*?”

“Nothing,” Eris said firmly.

She was telling the truth. She hadn’t done anything to these people. It was possible she simply didn’t remember, but the majority of people here were too talentless to enter the training hall. Not all of them, of course; some of the Sword God Style’s top practitioners would occasionally visit the town for supplies, mingling with the townspeople. Eris herself had rarely ventured outside the training hall, so there was no opportunity for her to ever do anything to *these* people.

“All right, then,” Rudeus said, somehow convinced. He kept himself glued to her back as they made their way through the town.

“Seriously, why are you hiding?”

“It’s not that I’m hiding! It’s just, you look really dashing from behind, you know? It’s not like I think you’ve pummeled each and every one of these townspeople with your fists and now they’re thirsty for revenge. Nope, not at all.”

“I really haven’t done anything to them!” Eris snapped.

Eris knew that if the situation called for it, Rudeus would leap out and come to her aid. He just didn’t handle open confrontation with strangers well.

“You’ll be fine,” Eris insisted again. “Now, let’s go.”

As she marched along, the people cleared a path for her—like Moses splitting the Red Sea. She moved forward, her head held high, not the least bit bothered.

Rudeus

THE VASTNESS OF THE Sword Sanctum surpassed my imagination.

“Whoa. This place is huge.”

The buildings were constructed of stone and wood, and somehow bore a close resemblance to a Japanese martial arts arena. The state of the complex suggested its construction was more ancient than the nearby town. The view at the front entrance was hardly adequate enough to get a sense of the place’s size, but I could tell there were quite a few buildings. It’d likely been expanded and altered over the years, culminating in the sprawling structure we saw today.

“Oh.”

I spotted my first resident of the place near the gate: a young man clad in a simple uniform. He carried a shovel, which he was using to clear the snow. A student here, I assumed. He looked chilled to the bone. I had to wonder if the rules forbade him from wearing a coat.

I glanced at Eris. “He looks like he’s going to freeze.”

“He does? Seems normal to me.”

Her answer confirmed my fears that there really was such a rule here. This place was practically the athletic capital of the world. If someone complained, they’d probably say, “It only feels cold because you lack the necessary willpower.”

“Um, excuse me,” I called over to the man.

“Yes, what is it?” He glanced up, and the moment his eyes landed on Eris, he gasped. The shovel fell from his hand, and he scrambled inside of the training hall.

I gave Eris a look. “Are you *sure* you didn’t do anything?”

“I trained with him a number of times.”

Oof. Poor guy. I bet he's still traumatized. I could empathize. Back when we lived in the Citadel of Roa, I trained with Eris daily, and she beat me to a bloody pulp each time. Back then she hadn't known the meaning of holding back; I could only imagine how much fiercer she was now. Dauntless about improving her skills, she was more powerful than ever. The guy was lucky to still have all of his teeth. I knew it wasn't right to apologize since whatever had happened between them was during training, but I still worried for him.

While I was lost in thought, Eris started making her way inside the training hall.

"Hey, hold up a sec," I said.

"Why?"

"Is it really okay for us to just…waltz right in?"

"Yes," she shot back, exasperated, as she briskly strode in.

I had no choice but to follow close at her heel if I didn't want to be left behind. Besides, I had to remind myself that she *was* one of the Sword God's apprentices. Surely that gave her a free pass to enter, right? Though personally, I'd hoped a guide would escort us to a reception room, where I'd fidget anxiously until the Sword God came to receive us. I'd put on my best salesman smile and launch into diplomatic conversation. That would have been way preferable to this. We were barging in like we owned the place.

A flurry of footsteps came echoing down the corridor toward us. Several men in training uniforms were headed our way, and what they held in their hands were not wooden swords. They were the real deal.

Oh, crap, oh, crap, oh, crap! I knew it! They think we're intruders!

"Eris?!" one of them gasped in surprise.

Oops. That's no man. The threatening atmosphere around her had thrown me off, but one of them was indeed a woman. She had

slightly dark skin, navy-blue hair, and sharp, menacing eyes. There was no mistaking it. She was a swordsman—or, uh, swordswoman. Her movements were sharp and well-practiced, leaving not a single opening. I was a real amateur at swordplay, but even I could tell she was tough. Those thugs we glimpsed in the town couldn't begin to compare to her.

Hold up a sec. I've met this girl before. Pretty sure she showed up for Ariel's coronation. It was then that her name finally came back to me: Nina. She was indeed a formidable fighter who could go toe-to-toe with Eris. From what I remembered back then, she had promised to aid us whenever we needed. *Talk is cheap, though; there's no guarantee she'll follow through.*

"Nina. It's been a while," Eris greeted her.

"Yes, it has. Why are you here?"

Eris jerked her shoulder in my direction. "Rudeus wants to talk to him."

I flashed my best businessman smile and said, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Rudeus Greyrat. I have come to—"

"'Him'?" Nina didn't so much as spare me a glance. Apparently, my salesman charms weren't working on her.

"The Sword God," Eris said.

Nina's face hardened. No, worse than that—a sudden aura of venomous hostility came pouring out of her. That did little to cow Eris—she stood firm. My legs were like jelly beneath me, quivering and shaking, but it was less fear than confusion that overcame me. *We're just here to meet with him. There's no reason for you to act like you're ready to murder us.*

"Gall Falion," Eris reiterated. "Is he not here?"

Nina's expression softened into a look of guarded suspicion before she finally relaxed. "You should at least call him Master."

“No way. Ghislaine is the only Master I have,” Eris said obstinately.

“Yeah? Well, whatever.” Nina breathed a deep sigh. I could tell she’d dealt with Eris’s petulant refusal to adhere to norms many times before now. “The rest of you, go on ahead. I’ll explain things to Eris.”

“But Lady Nina, now isn’t the time to—”

“This is Berserker Sword King Eris we’re talking about.”

Startled, the men stared at Eris. I had no idea what mayhem she had been up to during her stay here, but her name alone convinced them to back down.

“Very well.”

The men bowed their heads respectfully and rushed back down the hall, deeper into the complex. This time I heard no footfall. They hardly made a sound, and their posture was impeccable. None of them seemed particularly memorable, almost like background characters in a video game—NPCs—and yet from the way they held themselves, I could guess they were Sword Saints or higher.

That’s terrifying, I thought. Those were the exact people I did not want to start stuff with.

“All right, this way.” Nina motioned with her chin, and Eris followed after her. I obediently fell in line.

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We were guided to one of the complex’s main training buildings, apparently called the drill hall. The room had wooden flooring with a number of wooden swords hung up on the wall. It reminded me of a Japanese kendo hall. Curiously, I noted a speckled pattern all over the floor. They were stains, which raised

the question: what had they been spilling here? *Ahaha*, I tittered awkwardly in my head the moment it clicked. *This is blood.*

Nina strode forward until she arrived at the middle of the room, where she suddenly plopped down. Eris followed suit. They each sat with their left leg folded and their right knee raised. I thought it was a bit of an inappropriate posture for a girl to take, but on reflection, Ghislaine had taught me to sit the same way. The posture made it easy for a swordsman to get back to their feet and draw their weapon. This meant that, if the urge struck Nina, she could take off my head in an instant with the dangerously real blade at her side.

"Nina," Eris said, "Rudeus can't sit this close. It would put him in the range of your blade."

"Really? Your husband is a coward."

"He's a mage. He's practical."

The atmosphere around us was tense.

Well, uh, maybe I should just pluck up my courage and sit close anyway. I did come here to meet the Sword God, so I'm resolved to take some risks.

"Excuse me, I meant no disrespect. I was merely overwhelmed by the air in this place," I said as I took a seat beside Eris. I activated my Eye of Foresight to be on the safe side.

Nina finally rested her gaze on me. "So. Why have you come?"

"There's a certain individual I will be going into battle with, and I was hoping to enlist the Sword God's aid."

Her eyebrows knit in confusion. "I thought you weren't going to need help with any battles for several more decades?"

"Oh, I see you remember our conversation in the Kingdom of Asura. Thank you for that," I said, genuinely impressed.

She sniffed. "Of course I remember. I'm not Eris."

The hard and fast rule for communicating with Sword God Style practitioners was to keep things frank and easy to understand.

They weren't as erratic as Atofe, but they did have a tendency to whip out their sword the moment their mood began to sour. Even someone with delicate features like Nina was no exception—or so it was safe to assume.

"What I said back then hasn't changed, but I am here about a different matter. I will be fighting a man named Geese, see…"

"Hmm…"

I continued, "I'm sure the Sword God must be very busy indeed, but if you could kindly put me in contact with him…?"

Nina pulled a face. I assumed that she didn't want someone she didn't trust—like me—to meet the man.

"Anyway, I also brought a gift to present to the Sword God—something I am sure he will like." It wasn't a magic sword I had prepared for the occasion. Nothing like that. I'd brought a minor blade forged by the master smith Kuelkin a hundred years ago.

According to Orsted, the Sword God was a sword connoisseur who had collected no small number of blades. This one in particular was special to him because it was one he had desperately longed for as a youth to no avail. Over several decades, this blade had been passed around to new owners until finally landing in the hands of a middling nobleman in Asura Kingdom. This nobleman lived a life that never required him to use a sword. It may have remained there forever, decorating the man's parlor, had no one taken notice of it. Tragically (for him), I had used Ariel's name to cozy up to the man. I visited his house and peppered him with compliments for his good taste in his parlor decorations. In exchange for some favors, he relinquished the blade to me. All I had to do now was hand it over to the Sword God, and negotiations would hopefully go smoothly.

"Let me clarify one last time. The person you want to meet is Gall Falion, correct?" Nina asked.

Puzzled, I knitted my brows. "Huh? Well, yes. That's right." She phrased it as if there was another Sword God around here besides Gall Falion.

“Then he’s not here.”

“Oh, I see…” I nodded thoughtfully. “So, where has he gone? And when might I expect him to return?”

Nina shrugged. “Who knows. I doubt he ever will.”

“Hm?” My voice hitched in surprise. Something was definitely off. I glanced at Eris, who narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

Nina’s expression sobered as she returned Eris’s stare. She opened her mouth to speak, but her brow furrowed and no words would come out. Whatever was going on, she found it difficult to speak about it.

What, is he off to Asura to get hemorrhoid surgery or something?

“Sword God Gall Falion…lost in combat,” Nina said.

Eris’s lips thinned. “Against who?”

“Gino Britz.”

Eris’s eyes shot wide open.

Gino Britz, as far as I could remember, was a Sword Saint whose strength paled in comparison to Eris and Nina. According to Orsted, the man had talent, but whether anything ever came of it was highly contingent on factors that had little to do with the man himself.

Hold up a sec. Gino Britz actually beat Sword God Gall Falion? But that would mean…

“What you mean,” I said, trying to clarify, “is that the current Sword God is Mister Gino Britz?”

“Yes. My father—no, I mean, Sword God Gall Falion left the Sword Sanctum the day he lost.” Nina added that she had no idea of his current whereabouts.

I was at a loss. Moreover, I felt sorry for making her discuss something that had to be so difficult for her. Nina was bound to hold her father in high regard, so his loss to a much younger swordsman had to have come as a shock. This wasn't merely a change in leadership—Nina herself had been surpassed by someone who was supposed to be inferior to her.

"He fled in embarrassment," Eris muttered under her breath.

Yes, thanks, Eris. Let's antagonize the scary sword lady. A chill ran down my spine, and all the hair on my body stood on end as I contemplated the possible repercussions of her thoughtless statement. I pictured it: any second now, Nina would leap to her feet and draw her blade on Eris. Fortunately, that was just my imagination. My Eye of Foresight informed me that Nina would remain calmly seated.

"Yeah," Nina agreed. "I figure that's true. Gino always was inexperienced and unskilled compared to the rest of us."

Eris was quiet for a moment before saying, "But he's not now?"

"No, not anymore. Gino is stronger than anyone else out there. Of that much I'm certain." A mixture of emotions played across Nina's face as she spoke of him, some part fear and the rest admiration. Gino's strength had to be the real thing for her to react like that.

My target had shifted. Perhaps it was rude of me to give up on Falion so readily, but maybe allying with Gino Britz was the better option at present. The only issue with that was Orsted hadn't given me any data on him. Nor did I have a gift which might bring him around. It would be great if he'd accept this sword, but I doubted it would bring him much joy. It only held personal significance to Falion. Otherwise, it wasn't all that impressive.

Hmm. What to do? If he's strong enough to climb his way to the top and claim the title of Sword God, I can bet he's got a violent disposition. Considering that negotiations might fail, it'd probably be

safest to pull back for now… On the other hand, we've come all the way here.

It seemed best to at least meet and speak with him. I had no idea whether he'd like the gift, but at least I did have one. Nobody hates a present, right?

"Eris, do you feel like fighting Gino?" Nina asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Right now, you could become Sword God if you beat him."

Eris shrugged. "Not interested."

Nina breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay. Yeah, right. I figured. That's good to hear."

Come to think of it, I had heard something from Orsted before. He said that there were people who became Sword God only to disappear as time marched on, lost to the annals of history. It wasn't a system of hereditary succession, after all. Sword God was a title bestowed upon the strongest of the style's practitioners. That was why the moment the reigning Sword God lost a battle, they lost their position as well. For most, defeat spelled death. It wasn't just a loss of status but of life.

All you had to do to become Sword God was beat the previous one in battle. If the Sword God fell to someone outside the Sword God Style, his strongest pupil would take his place. Whatever the case, there were a number of Sword Emperors and subsequently Sword Kings who were no less skilled than their higher-ranked counterparts. That made it easy to guess what a regime change like that would lead to—chaos within Sword Sanctum.

The same had happened when Gall Falion succeeded the title. Those of roughly equivalent strength from Sword Emperors to Sword Kings decided to challenge the newly appointed Sword God in hopes of stealing the title for themselves. There were Sword Gods who only stood for a single day before being stripped of the title and falling into obscurity.

This same thing could easily happen to Gino Britz.

“What about you, Nina? Not going to try for Sword God?” Eris asked.

“I…can’t even consider that as an option,” Nina said, stroking her belly.

She’s acting kinda cagey about it. Could she be on her period or something? Is that it? Nah, not like women only rub their bellies because they’re on their period. It’s not good to make assumptions. I bet she’s constipated.

I glanced at Eris. She looked shocked by Nina’s answer. Apparently, it had caught her off guard.

“Oh…” Eris’s face fell, giving way to disappointment and despondency.

I didn’t know too much about the relationship between these two, save for the fact that they were the same age, and that there weren’t many who could stand as Eris’s equal and befriend her. Their connection to one another seemed decidedly different from the one Linia and Pursena shared. I had no idea how Eris felt toward the woman.

There was, however, one thing I could tell: Nina was Gino Britz’s ally. She had become a Sword King before Gino had and was older than him, but that hadn’t stopped her from recognizing his strength and legitimacy as the new Sword God. The way she had spoken showed that, until she heard Eris’s answer, she was worried that Eris was yet another who had come to challenge Gino for the title. Had that been Eris’s intention, Nina might have wanted to challenge her to a duel first.

It was only now that we had established Eris had no interest in the position that Nina lowered her right knee, tucking both legs under her.

“Would it be possible for us to pay our respects to the new Sword God?” I inquired hopefully.

Nina shook her head. “Not right now. He already has his hands full.”

“I had a feeling you would say that.”

No doubt there were swordsmen from all over the world flooding into the Sword Sanctum right now. I had no idea how many were Sword Emperors and Sword Kings, but on top of that, there were likely those from other denominations who made the trip under the impression that they had a shot at taking him down. Nina and the rest of those here who had accepted Gino as Sword God were playing the role of weeding out the unworthy.

Eris seems a little advanced for Nina to be weeding out, I thought, but I figured that probably wasn’t the reason for this private meeting. She’d just wanted to lay out the situation privately.

Although, she seemed to know Eris pretty well. Perhaps she thought that if she left Eris to her own devices, our Berserker Sword King might well charge right into the depths of the Sanctum and pick a fight with Gino. *Still, Miss Nina, I will have you know that our Eris is far more mature than she once was.*

“If you want to talk to Gino, hm…” Nina paused, contemplating. “Things should calm down here in a little while. You can come back then.”

I nodded. “All right then. Oh, but just in case, I’d like to ask something. A man named Geese hasn’t come by here, has he? He’s a demon with a face like a monkey.”

“Demonfolk? Here? Most likely not, no.”

“Have you had any dreams about a man who insists he is a god and tries to pass on a divine message?”

She quirked a brow at me, confused. “No.” She shot Eris a look, silently demanding to know what this was all about.

Eris glared back, annoyed that Nina would expect her to explain.

Yeah, um…sorry for the weird question there.

“If not, then nothing to worry about. The two I mentioned are infamous scammers, so if they ever do show up, be very careful.”

“Got it.”

Guess the Sword Sanctum is a big flop then. I planned to look into Gall Falion’s whereabouts later, but for the moment, we could do nothing but excuse ourselves.

“In that case, I’ve done all I came here to do.” I glanced at Eris. “What about you? Would you like to look around some more? This place must bring back memories for you.”

“No need.”

Oof, that’s cold.

Nina seemed relieved. The atmosphere around the Sanctum was grim already. Imagine Eris, taking a little stroll, whipping out her sword at passersby. She had matured, but not enough that she was willing to back down if someone picked a fight.

“Well, we’ll come here again later then, Nina,” said Eris.

“Sounds good, Eris. Come back once things have settled down a little more.”

Their voices grew gentle as they bid their brief farewells.

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We left the training hall to hear a cacophony of noises from deeper within the complex. Either Gino was battling other practitioners of the Sword God Style, or his sympathizers were doing their best to take down any would-be challengers.

Eris paused for a moment and glanced back over her shoulder. She folded her arms. Her legs were spread at shoulder-width as always, and her lips were pursed.

Did I do something to upset her? I wondered. She wasn't even looking at me, though. Her eyes were glued to the training hall.

"What's the matter?" I asked finally.

"It's like I don't even know this place anymore." Her expression clouded with indescribable sorrow. It was rare to see this much emotion from her. Even when she gazed upon the desolated Fittoa Region, she'd remained undaunted.

Yeah, but she was prepared to see that, I reminded myself. This time she had returned to her old, familiar stomping grounds, certain that nothing would be different than before…and it was.

It had to be like graduating from high school only to return later on as an alumnus. You pop in to see your old club and of course the members and the adviser are different, but the atmosphere and the goals they're striving toward have all changed, too. It's then you get hit with the feeling that there's no place here for you anymore.

Admittedly, I never took part in any clubs, so my knowledge about them comes from manga.

"Hm?" When I looked up, I noticed a man carrying two wooden swords, hurrying toward us from the inside of the training hall.

A challenger fleeing with his tail tucked between his legs, I presume? I soon realized he was wearing a uniform. He was a student here. Closer inspection further revealed that he was the same person I had called out to earlier, the guy who was shoveling the snow at the entrance.

"Miss Eris!"

He tossed one of the wooden swords at her. It came zooming toward her at an incredible speed, but she snatched it out of the air easily—a loud clap echoed as it smacked against her palm. He was back to settle a score. *I knew it. She* did *do something here, didn't she?*

"Would you mind having a practice round with me?" he asked, instantly proving I'd been way off the mark.

Without missing a beat, Eris answered, “Sure. Come get some.”

I backed off of them so I could observe their match. I was honestly having a little trouble following what was going on. Conversation between Sword God Style practitioners were barely a series of grunts, and the actions that followed them were physical and abrupt.

Silence fell between the two as they each took up a stance with their wooden swords. Eris held her sword high while the student held his sword close to his center. I prayed that Eris wouldn’t go overboard.

“Shhk!”

In the next moment, a sharp inhale broke through the still air. The student’s form blurred. Eris chose that simultaneous instant to make her move. A metallic clang echoed. Before I knew what was happening, the student was on one knee, his wooden sword spinning through the air. In the space he’d occupied scant seconds earlier, a puff of air curled—his lingering breath—which disappeared as his sword came crashing down, stabbing into the snow.

It all happened in a flash. I was only able to follow what happened thanks to my Eye of Foresight. The student had unleashed his Sword of Light and Eris had returned the technique in kind.

The really scary thing here is that this young guy who was shoveling snow moments earlier suddenly came at her with a technique like the Sword of Light. I’m still here, right? My head’s still connected to my neck? It’s not like they lopped off my head when I was walking down the corridor inside the complex and I’m just having some crazy dying dream…right?

“Your grip with your left hand is weak at the end of your swing,” Eris said.

“Wha?!”

“That’s why your sword went flying.”

There were a few seconds of silence before he said, “Incredible! Thank you very much!” He had already picked himself out of the snow, but upon receiving her feedback, he lowered to his knee and bowed his head.

“Hmph.” Eris grunted at him and tossed her wooden sword to the ground before starting toward me. “What?” She pursed her lips and glared at me when she noticed me looking at her.

“Oh, nothing.”

A significant weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Her expression said what she would not: *Yeah. This is how this place is supposed to be.*

“The place is in a bit of disarray with everything that’s going on. I’m sure when it all dies down, it’ll be exactly how you remembered it,” I said.

“Whatever. I don’t care.”

In spite of her protests, she looked relieved to hear it.

We’ll be back again. Provided we live through our battle with Geese, of course.

Our visit to the Sword Sanctum came to a close. It was a bit of a dud, but such was life. Even if Gall Falion was no longer the Sword God, he would still make a formidable ally in battle. I would leave tracking him down to my mercenary band and preoccupy myself with locating someone else. Next up: North God Kalman the Third.

Chapter 8:
A North God, an Adventurer, and More…

NORTH GOD KALMAN was one of the three heroes who cooperated to slay the Demon God Laplace during the Laplace War. That said, North God Kalman the First—so-called to distinguish him from his successors—was rather boring when compared to his fellow heroes, Armored Dragon King Perugius and Dragon God Urupen. Naturally, he was also less famous. If an exam required students to name the Three Godslayers, no doubt the one the student would struggle to remember would be North God Kalman.

It wasn't until North God Kalman the Second that the name became famous. The holder of that title was Alex Rybak. He traveled throughout the world, leaving tales of his heroic deeds in his wake. These stories were later recounted by troubadours and novelists who spread the legend even farther. With so many people telling them, the stories took on a sort of life of their own. Point being, the North God was only famous because of the second guy to bear the title.

North God Kalman the First made an appearance in *Legend of Perugius*, but he was still more of a supporting character than anything else. In it, North God Kalman was portrayed as a swordsman with incredible techniques. How incredible? He was able to defeat Demon King Atoferatofe single-handedly. Those sword skills saved Perugius on multiple occasions. He and his seven companions triumphed on their dangerous journey and survived the Laplace War.

Sure, North God Kalman was impressive in his own right, but he couldn't manipulate an entire floating fortress like Perugius. He didn't encroach on Laplace's territory with twelve subordinates, face Laplace one-on-one like Dragon God Urupen, or have any other notable episodes to make him memorable. Instead, his subtle

strength supported the two more renowned members of their trio from the shadows.

There was more to his story than just that, however.

In the wake of the Laplace War, the Demon God's remaining forces continued to resist across the lands their master had conquered. That was when North God Kalman went on all by himself to face Demon King Atofe. After a protracted battle, he at last claimed victory over her. None knew what happened in the immediate aftermath. What we did know was that he wound up marrying Atofe, forcing her to back out of the battles she was still fighting. The loss of an esteemed warrior like Atofe dealt a heavy blow to the remnants of Laplace's forces, and so the world was soon at peace once again.

Kalman was truly responsible for putting an end to the entire war. Granted, what he did was positively insane. How else could you classify riding into battle against Atofe alone, beating her, and then marrying her?

Perugius's legend had painted him in a dim, reserved light, but the facts suggested he was nuts, to put it bluntly. Still, his power was the real deal. I could understand why he'd won so much of Perugius's hard-earned respect.

This North God Kalman had already passed away long ago. He was a child of man, and human men had a comparatively short lifespan in this world. Atofe, on the other hand, was an immortal demon. She had lived significantly longer than Roxy, Sylphie, or me, and her children inherited that same characteristic. Thus, Kalman's children enjoyed long lifespans.

The aforementioned Kalman the Second was still alive and well. He was wandering the world, spreading knowledge of the North God Style. The name Kalman didn't end with him, either, for there was a North God Kalman the Third. He was also known as Alexander Rybak. He was the son of the second generational head

and had only recently inherited the name, still being a very young swordsman.

Unlike with the Sword God, there was no rule in the North God Style saying that only one person could hold the title of North God at a time. Thus, two currently held the title. The second generational head was semi-retired at the moment. Kalman the Third was the one listed among the Seven Great Powers, and he was the one researching fighting styles that used other types of weapons besides the sword (among other things).

North God Kalman the Third seemed the most likely candidate for becoming another of the Man-God's disciples. According to Orsted, the chances were quite high, if not certain, and so he was the next on my list to locate. I was hoping to add the man to our roster of allies before he joined the Man-God. If he already had, then it was my duty to dispose of him.

Judging by what Orsted had told me, Kalman the Third was likely on the Central Continent in the Conflict Zone. He was also, without a doubt, more powerful than me. I would need to carefully assess the situation to confirm whether he was an enemy and discover a foolproof plan for defeating him if that was the case.

Gonna have to really brace myself for this one.

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Anyway, that was how I wound up bringing Eris with me once more. We set out for the southern part of the Central Continent where the Conflict Zone was located.

The name of this region by itself was unsettling. The place was dotted with countries, settlements, and tribes that couldn't quite be classified as sovereign nations, and all of them were locked in never-ending warfare with one another. It was like this world's version of Japan's Warring States period.

Take a history book, turn the pages back four hundred years, and you'd find this place caught in the final throes of the Laplace War. The Asura Kingdom, located in the western part of the continent where the soil was most fertile, was the only realm that managed to escape destruction and retain its grip over its territories.

The central and southern regions, where the soil wasn't quite so rich, hadn't belonged to anyone at the time. The hopefuls who had survived the war and now wanted to rest flooded to these unclaimed areas and began setting up countries of their own, desiring to turn the areas into bountiful lands of their own.

For a while, there was no strife between them, but as each realm gained more power and their borders became established, they clashed. The situation changed. It began with small skirmishes that ballooned, pulling in every nearby nation. This was the opening act of the Period of Conflict.

The King Dragon Realm was the first nation to extricate itself from the chaos of war in that period. Its capital was planted in the bowels of the continent's southern region—a less-than-ideal location. Real-estate value aside, its borders encroached on the lair of the King Dragons from which the realm derived its name. The King Dragon Realm formed an execution squad to drive the King Dragons out and successfully claimed the mountain where they had resided. This allowed the Realm to get its hands on mineral resources, and in an instant, they became the strongest of the countries in the southern region.

Like the Oda Nobunaga of the southern provinces, I thought.

At any rate, the King Dragon Realm hoped to use that momentum to claim the territories in the south and began invading its neighbors. They occupied a number of countries along the coast, their names now lost to history, and claimed Sanakia Kingdom, Kikka Kingdom, and Shirone Kingdom as vassal states. Using Shirone Kingdom as a foothold, the King Dragon Realm was poised to move in on the Conflict Zone and conquer the entire area to add to its expansive territories.

Their plans were thwarted by two countries who intervened: the Asura Kingdom and the Holy Kingdom of Millis. They pressured the King Dragon Realm, warning them that if they invaded the Conflict Zone, Asura and Millis would not stand by and watch it happen. All three signed a pact, agreeing they would not interfere with the Conflict Zone.

Each of these three powers desperately wanted the land in the center of the Central Continent, of course. Each independently came up with the same idea: they would pull the strings of a chosen ruler within the region. Someday, one of the countries would unite the Conflict Zone, and if their chosen champion sat at the helm, they'd make that country their vassal state.

What followed was chaos and war. Each kingdom sent their own spies into the Conflict Zone, where they would infiltrate the ranks of whichever nation was gaining power and making a move to unify the region. Their attempts to hamstring one another would inevitably catapult the promising nation into civil war, causing it to collapse. The territory would either fracture or be invaded and destroyed by its neighbors, sending the dream of a unified region up in smoke.

None of the three nations involved from the outside really minded this. The Conflict Zone provided an import and export industry for military equipment, so even if they couldn't unify the region and bring it under their control, it was no great loss. It was just one more place with a potentially promising future for them to send their spies. The Conflict Zone was the site of a great cold war, while publicly all three puppeteer nations kept their hands clean.

During the Displacement Incident, Philip and Hilda had found themselves transported here. They were mistaken for spies and died after being tortured. It made sense in the context of the history of the place. I'd have to be careful.

I had already laid the groundwork ahead of time with Millis's Blessed Child and received a passage permit from Millis's Missionary Knights. With this, I could easily slip through each

country's borders. Few would be foolish enough to pick a fight with Millis's Overseas Expeditionary Forces.

It would still be very foolish to let my guard down.

If someone were to claim my permit was a counterfeit, people would likely believe them regardless of the truth. It was all too common for outsiders to be the puppets of foreign powers. They'd dispose of me in an instant if I seemed suspicious.

The backing of a power like Asura or Millis in the Conflict Zone wasn't a surefire asset here like it was elsewhere. That was why I had decided to pass myself off as a simple adventurer for this trip. Eris and I made up a two-man squad—a swordsman and a magician. An A-rank duo who had come out this way to adventure into some labyrinths. That was our cover story. North God Kalman the Third was also an adventurer, from what I understood, so it was the perfect excuse for making contact with him.

With all that decided, Eris and I made our way to Gardenia Kingdom's town of Kide. It was a beautiful place, blessed by the fertile soil so common to the Central Continent. Beautiful Gardenia was only one of many countries nestled in the Conflict Zone.

The architecture here was far more primitive than what you would find in either Asura or the King Dragon Realm. The town lacked an underground sewer system, so the smell of excrement hung heavy in the streets. Meanwhile, the townspeople milling about had a dead look in their eyes, and a group of men in unusually heavy armor kept an inordinately sharp eye out as they went on their guard's rounds. It wasn't somewhere I wanted to stay for very long.

According to Orsted, North God Kalman the Third kept a headquarters around this area at the moment. *Why would he choose such a dangerous place?* I wondered. The man aspired to be a hero. Perhaps so he enjoyed staying in such volatile places, where things were liable to take a sudden, violent turn.

He was already famous among adventurers. There were few in the world who could count themselves among the SS-rank, and he

was one of them. That was the pinnacle of the Adventurers' Guild. Despite all of his success, North God Kalman the Third didn't have the humility of a master. He boasted and stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Like, what was he, the protagonist of a light novel or something?

Thankfully, that meant it ought to be fairly easy to get information on him if I visited the local Adventurers' Guild.

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Kide's Adventurers' Guild was a tired, shabby place. The building itself was old, with noticeable signs of repair throughout, and it was filthy. It made no attempt to varnish the fact that it sat at the center of war and death. To me, it looked like an isolated figure in a desolate waste, almost too tired to carry on.

"That's why I'm saying we should get moving now while we've got the chance!"

Once we passed through the rickety old door to the entrance, a woman's voice suddenly boomed around us. It was uncannily familiar. I was sure I had forgotten it, but the moment it hit my ears, it came with a rush of nostalgia. *Yes, that's right. That's what she sounded like.*

This was more laid-back than I recalled her being, and despite her shouting, there was something more rational about the way she spoke.

"There's no way. The front lines are too close. We'll get swept up in it."

"But you understand the reality of it, don't you?"

When I followed the sound of the voice, I found a familiar face to match. Her blonde hair had grown down to her shoulders, and she was a little taller, too. *Wait, actually, maybe she's the same height?* Her face certainly looked more mature than I remembered. She had

become an adult woman. Her attire looked more expensive and more practical, but her armor was covered in scratches. A bow and quiver—a rare weapon for any adventurer to choose—hung at her back. At first, I thought it was the same primitive one she'd used in the past, but closer inspection revealed it was an impressive composite bow.

When I first met her, she was only a fledgling who maintained a brusque facade so that nobody would speak down to her. Our second chance meeting was in the Magic City of Sharia, where she'd accepted a job as Ariel's bodyguard—the two of us had just happened to bump into one another. Back then, she'd struck me as the backbone of her party.

"If we move right now, the army's definitely gonna find us at the border. Whether that's Gardenia's army or Nekrina's, the outcome is the same. I shouldn't have to spell it out. You know what'll happen to us, don't you?"

"But if we don't move, then Nekrina's army may storm this town!"

"Or maybe not."

"Same could be said for us making a move now. They might not find us, either!"

This woman looked much more like a veteran after all this time. She was trading opinions with a woman I presumed to be the party leader. Sure, the words sounded argumentative, but her voice was too steady for it to be a serious fight. The other people around them—I assumed other party members—didn't strike me as overconfident. They weren't deathly pale and overcome with despair, either. They were simply standing there, waiting for their leader to come to a final decision. Each of them were calmly listening, assessing the circumstances and how best to overcome them.

I had seen a party like this once before. *Pretty sure it was an S-rank party discussing stuff before heading into a labyrinth.*

Perhaps Fangs of the Black Wolf had been the same way. Not that Paul was anywhere near as laid-back as the members of this party.

Parties that reached S-rank weren't anything like those cobbled together haphazardly; these people had a choice, and it forged a sense of solidarity.

"Ah."

While I was lost in my reverie, one of the members turned her gaze this way, twirling a strand of hair in her fingers. She was a mage, and she wore pigtails. Did I know her? *Pretty sure her name was Alisa or something?* She was really attached to Roxy, I remembered. It was hard to forget someone who liked Roxy that much.

Alisa was about fifteen years old when I met her. She'd called all of the members of her party "Elder Sister," if I recall right. There was nothing childish about her anymore. She, too, had a veteran air about her, even as she simply sat in a chair. No longer was her clothing youthful and cutesy. This was a seasoned mage. If you stood the two of us side-by-side and asked which of us seemed the more reliable choice, she'd be the safer bet.

Maybe that's only natural. It has been five years.

"It's Sara's old fling," Alisa blurted out.

Her abrupt exclamation jolted the other women into looking up at me. I had gotten used to women looking at me like that. *Wonder why?* I guess my wives glared at me a few times a day. This went double for the one immediately behind me, who was standing with her legs spread out shoulder-width beneath her. *Eris, please don't glare daggers at me. I'm not the same man I was back then, and we didn't even go all the way. In fact, my "old fling," if I have one, is you.*

"Rudeus?!" Sara gasped.

In my younger years—or, to be more specific, the years when I was suffering from erectile dysfunction after Eris left me—there had

been an archer in the adventuring party who'd looked out for me. Her name was Sara.

"It's been a while," I said.

Yes, to this woman, I was the one who got away.

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Sara and her party, the Amazons, had come to this town having accepted a request from the mission board. It was simple. All they had to do was bring a letter. Pretty common request for the Adventurers' Guild. The rank associated with it would change depending on the distance and difficulty of delivery, but in general, the reward for it was measly.

Sara's party had lucked out; this delivery request had a relatively impressive reward with the first half paid upfront. She and the other women had hesitated because the destination was located within the Conflict Zone, but they were short on cash, so they decided to take it on.

It turned out to be as simple as they'd hoped. They had spent five days traveling to get to their destination, where they delivered the missive successfully. It proved to be little trouble and a good break from their regular work.

What happened afterward was what caught them off-guard.

Just as Sara and her party arrived at this town, the war between Gardenia Kingdom and Nekrina Kingdom suddenly heated up. The borders were promptly sealed off for travel, and Sara and her companions were trapped.

A country at war wasn't a great place for an adventurer to get stuck. Public safety plummeted, fewer missions were posted, and the adventurers in the area were practically conscripted by the Guild to act as mercenaries. Sure, the pay wasn't half bad, but the fatality

rate was ridiculous. No adventurer would willingly partake in such work except for specialists who did it routinely.

The Amazons were a veteran party, but they weren't killers. They were eager to get out of Dodge, so to speak, as quickly as possible. There was one little problem with this: If they tried to forcibly bypass the border, they risked one of the two armies finding them. Adventurers were a veritable treasure trove of information. The Gardenia army would be none too eager to let information about their own country slip, and the Nekrina army would be chomping at the bit to get their hands on any piece of enemy intelligence. If either army discovered them, they would be caught, and the Amazons were a party of only women. It was easy to imagine what would happen to them afterward.

"So there you have it. Damned if we go, damned if we don't," Sara said with a shrug.

She was currently acting as the party's second-in-command. One of their leaders had been killed since I last saw them. Sara had been the most veteran party member at the time, which was how she landed her current position. It was heartrending to lose a party member and comrade, but being an adventurer meant walking the thin line between life and death. Such was the nature of the job.

Here, in the present, Sara and her friends were in a serious bind. I wasn't against the idea of helping them. Are you kidding? If I were to turn a blind eye to an old acquaintance like this when they needed me simply because I was busy with my own work, I'm not sure I could live with myself. What if something horrible happened to them because of that and they all died? If I heard about it later, it'd tear a deep, dark void open inside me.

"I think I can help you out," I said. "Keep this on the lowdown, but I've got a passage permit from Millis. It can get you across the border if that's what you need."

The women's faces lit up at my offer.

“You sure? We don’t exactly have much money on us at the moment, so we can’t really repay you for helping us.”

“I don’t need your coin anyway. You can pay me another way.” I flashed a mischievous smile at them, and every woman’s face instantly hardened. Even Sara was giving me an intimidating look. However, after a moment, her grimace crumbled and gave way to a strained smile.

“Fine. But there’s a lotta girls in our party who’ve got a real hatred for men, so…make do with just me, okay? Though, who knows if you’ll even be able to get it up for me.”

“No, that wasn’t what I meant! I want information, okay! Why’re you all looking at me like that?!”

I guess my mischievous smile had been more of a leer. *And here I thought I’d gotten better at it.*

“I’ve got three loving wives, thank you. I don’t need any more women!”

“Oh? Too bad. I was thinking we could finally have a do-over of that day,” teased Sara. She was the only one who seemed to understand I’d been joking. *Not that I’d intended it as a joke.*

“Don’t tease like that, least of all in front of my wife,” I said. “Right, Eris?” I glanced back at her to find her in her usual pose.

Eris grunted. “Rudeus won’t even touch *my* breasts right now. There’s no way he would mean it that way!”

Ah ha! See, this is the kind of trust you build by being an all-around decent guy. Eris was exactly right, too. I wasn’t exactly short on willing women. If I needed to, I could wait until bedtime, feel up Eris’s breasts all I wanted, and wake up the next morning relieved and refreshed. *Wait…would that mean she’d lose her faith in me again?*

Having heard what Eris had to say, the women of the Amazons looked very relieved. That settled one problem…and another immediately cropped up.

Sara's face had grown dark. "Eris?" she asked.

"What?" Eris snapped at her.

"Eris, as in the woman who abandoned Rudeus?"

Uh-oh.

"I didn't abandon him."

"Oh, yeah? Rudeus said you did, though. I guess he forgave you for it and let you marry him, then?"

That hostility was obvious enough that both me and Eris picked up on it. Eris's face scrunched, annoyed at the other woman's audacity. *This really, really isn't good. You'd better knock it off, Sara. This is the one person you seriously don't wanna pick a fight with. She's not gonna let you play this off as a joke.*

"Sara, drop it," Alisa said with a teasing tone. "Bickering with the wife isn't how you win a man back."

"No! That's not what I'm after!"

This elicited a light chuckle from the crowd. The tension broke, and I let out the breath I was holding.

"So, um, Sara, about that whole thing… There's some pretty delicate circumstances involved," I tried to explain. "The two of us had a sort of misunderstanding, or to be more precise, I got the wrong idea…"

"Yeah, I figured. If there weren't some extenuating circumstances, your other scary bodyguard wife would never have gone back to you.

Other scary wife? *Ah, she must be referring to Sylphie.* Sara did have a point there. Sylphie had forgiven me for marrying other women, yes, but she was also very picky about who she was willing to accept into our family. She had allowed Roxy and Eris in, but whatever rigid criteria she kept had ruled Nanahoshi out. I was equally remorseful for how I'd handled things, but grateful for her graciousness through the whole situation.

“Well, I’ll let you fill me in on the *delicate* details later. Now what info is it you’re wanting?” Sara asked.

Finally, she let us get to our actual business here. This whole situation had been tying my stomach in knots, and I hoped the subject wouldn’t come up again.

“Right, see, I’m actually looking for North God Kalman at the moment. We heard he was using this area as his base of operations.”

“North God Kalman?!” cried an unfamiliar girl as she leapt to her feet. She looked about eighteen years old, with chestnut-brown hair and an energetic air about her. There was a sword hanging at her hip, suggesting she was either a swordsman or warrior. A frontline fighter, certainly. She wasn’t part of the Amazons the last time I saw them. “Oh, oh! I know about him! I’m a big fan!”

“So you are!” I said. *He’s got himself some fans, huh? Guess that’s to be expected. He is an SS-rank adventurer.*

“He was in this area about three years ago. I’ve heard rumors that he’s moved to Hammerpolka!”

Three years ago? Awfully old info for someone who considers themselves a fan, but I guess that’s how it goes. Unlike my previous world, this one didn’t have the benefit of the Internet to track your favorite celebs.

“Hammerpolka is in the Markien Mercenary Country! That’s directly south from here. Oh! Can you believe it? That’s in the exact opposite direction of Nekrina Kingdom! And we just happen to want to cross the border and head to the safer southern region! This is practically a godsend, isn’t it?! Don’t you think, Mr. Sub-Leader’s-Old-Fling?!”

She was awfully glib, not that I minded. She reminded me of Aisha, actually. I worried she wasn’t a fan of North God Kalman at all and was telling me this to help them get out of their jam. *Whatever. I’ll just keep an eye out for info to verify what she’s telling me.*

“Even if he were in the complete opposite direction of where you guys want to go, I still plan to see you off,” I said.

“Really?! I guess I should have expected such compassion from the sub leader’s former fling! You’re a real peach! Wish we could swap ya with Sara…she’s just got a real tummy pooch!”

My eyes wandered instinctively to Sara’s stomach, which she promptly hid with her arms.

“It is *not* a ‘pooch!’” Her voice was the most menacing I’d heard all day. I almost ducked behind Eris in fear.

I mean, she was a little thicker, but I was not in a position to judge considering how I’d looked in a previous life. That was for certain.

“Anyway, how about we start heading for Hammerpolka then?” I offered.

With that, the Amazons joined up with Eris and me, and our little party set out to bypass the country’s border.

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We got through the border uneventfully. I thought perhaps we’d be grilled about how regular adventurers like us came to possess a passage permit from Millis’s Missionary Knights. I’d even cooked up a plausible excuse in case that happened—but the men at the border merely glanced at our pass and, faces drawn in displeasure, let us through. Same face the Amazons had pulled at me earlier, strangely.

“You didn’t steal that or anything, did you? You sure we won’t get in trouble for this?”

“It’s fine. We won’t get in trouble,” I said.

For the pass to prompt such skepticism meant it was a bigger deal than I’d realized. Everyone knew what consequences would

await someone who claimed a fraudulent association with Millis's Missionary Knights. It'd bring the entire Church of Millis down on you.

My future self had left diary entries detailing how the Church had killed off Zanoba and Aisha, so I had an idea of what fearsome enemies they could be. I had obtained it through the Blessed Child in Millis, though, so I wasn't worried.

"You adventurers there, stop!"

As we made our way along the road, a voice boomed around us. When I glanced over my shoulder, I spotted three horses headed straight for us from the direction of the border. Don't worry, the horses weren't the ones who spoke. They weren't Nokopara. One of the knights riding them had bellowed at us.

When the knights caught up to us, they glared down at us from atop their mounts. They were clad in silver armor inscribed with the Holy Country of Millis's national flag. These were the Missionary Knights.

The moment the Amazons realized who these people were, they all went deathly pale. In hushed whispers, they asked, "What do we do?! What do we do!" Sara's hand crept to the short sword at her waist.

I glanced at Eris. She'd already dropped into a battle stance. I threw up a hand to stop them and stepped out in front.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"We received a report of a group of people holding a passage permit from Millis. Are we correct in assuming you are that party?"

I nodded. "Yes, that would be us."

"We have received no contact from the top informing us about you and your party. We will need to inspect your permit."

Holy crap. It's only been an hour or so since we used that passage permit and crossed the border. Isn't this a little fast? Are you telling me the Missionary Knights are everywhere? Scary.

“Perfectly understandable. Please have a look.” I quickly showed the permit to them.

One of the knights snatched it out of my hand and began carefully scrutinizing it. He quickly lifted the visor on his helmet as if shocked, then glanced between my face and the permit in his hand and whispered to one of his comrades. His compatriot produced a mage’s beginner wand, which he used to prod the permit. The jewel capping the wand gave off a pale glow. The men traded glances between each other, nodded, and dismounted from their horses. Soon after their feet hit the ground, they knelt in front of us. The man who’d taken my permit reverently offered the permit back to me, cupping it in his hands.

“Our sincere apologies for such impertinence! We had no idea you were the Lady Blessed Child’s envoy.”

Thank goodness. Looks like we’re cleared of suspicion.

“Not at all. Thank you men for your diligent work,” I said politely, retrieving my permit. To my eyes, all I could see were a number of Millis emblems stamped across the front of the permit, but apparently something about it indicated that it came from the Blessed Child. I guess they’d done more than a routine counterfeit check.

It was a strange feeling, having a group of highly distinguished knights take a knee in front of me like this. Like something out of a period drama.

“I must ask, however, what brings Her Holiness’s envoy out to these parts?”

“I’m searching for someone,” I explained.

“Might we ask who?”

“North God Kalman. Do you know of him?”

The knight nodded. “Yes, but the North God is no longer in this area. We have heard rumors that he left quite a while ago for

Hammerpolka. It seems he has recently left that area as well, so his current whereabouts are unknown."

Crap, really? If he'd already left this area three years ago, it did kind of make sense for him to have already moved on from the new town he'd taken lodgings in.

"I'm also searching for a demon with the face of a monkey. Guy named Geese."

"A demonfolk? To what end?" The knight's eyes gleamed with enmity, sending a chill down my spine.

"Well…he's my enemy. I want to know where he is so I can defeat him," I said.

"Aha, so that is your aim! I am unaware of the man's name, but a demon with a monkey face has been spotted recently in Hammerpolka."

Hey, that is *some helpful information.* Then again, I didn't think Geese would be that easy to locate. It could easily be someone else. There was still a possibility that we might bump into him here by sheer coincidence. He was probably moving his pieces on the board, same as I was.

"Should you require it, we could send our fastest rider there to apprehend the man," offered the knight.

Hm, should I take him up on it? If it was Geese and he realized I was the one having him captured, he'd probably try to escape, wouldn't he? *Hmm.*

"How many Missionary Knights do you have at your disposal?" I asked.

"In Hammerpolka, ten."

"I see. Please capture the man."

"Yes, sir!"

The leader of the group jerked his chin, giving a signal to one of the knights beside him. Having received his orders, the man

immediately climbed back up on his horse, racing off in the direction we were already headed ourselves. I felt a little bad asking them to do this. What I was doing wasn't official church business, after all.

"Well then," said the leader, "we will be returning to our mission then."

"Of course. Thank you so much."

"Certainly, sir. Though, while I realize it is improper of me to bring this up, if you are a follower of Millis, I question how appropriate it is for you to be traveling with so many women like this."

"Oh…"

From an outsider's perspective, it probably looked like I was dragging a whole harem with me. There was actually only one woman in this bunch I was allowed to put my hands on, and that same one would give me a swift punch to the face if I tried it. On the other hand, if I admitted that I wasn't a follower, things would only get more complicated.

"I have merely hired these women as bodyguards."

The knight nodded thoughtfully. "I wouldn't assume otherwise, however…"

"If neither party is inclined to engage in intimate relations, then their sex shouldn't matter, should it? And for those who are so inclined, being of the same sex would not necessarily stop them from partaking in such acts either. Or am I mistaken?"

The man sucked in a sharp breath. "Yes, as you say, sir! My humblest apologies!"

There were many men in Asura Kingdom who were gay, after all. Beautiful men who surrounded themselves with those of the same sex to form a gay harem. So really, the gender of your party didn't matter, did it? Fortunately, Millis wasn't so closed-minded as to forbid homosexuality. Harems were a total no-go, though, for any sex or orientation. At least they were egalitarian about that.

“Please excuse us then!”

The two knights climbed on their mounts and left, looking surprisingly pleased with the answer I had given them. I was simply glad I had managed to dodge any further trouble. At least if they did later discover I wasn’t a follower of Millis, I hadn’t lied to them about that. *This shouldn’t cause any problems down the line at least. I hope.*

“What?” I asked, noticing the look Sara was giving me.

“Nothing. Just…it was real after all.”

“What, you thought I would use a counterfeit and expose everyone to danger?”

Sara shrugged. “I mean, it’s not something people can get their hands on that easily.”

“Well, I’m in the line of work where this is typical.”

The Orsted Corporation was nothing if not focused on the future. Thus, to protect the well-being of his employees, our CEO had established some impressive connections.

“Yeah? Guess you’ve moved up in the world since I met you. A real big shot.”

I don’t think I’m a big shot, honestly.

***

That evening, we made camp by the roadside. We started two bonfires and assigned someone to guard each one. That wasn’t a suggestion anyone made, either—it was something the Amazons did habitually. I figured, given Sara’s mention that some of the girls really hated men, it was an attempt to get what distance from me they could when they slept.

I wasn’t bothered by it. I wasn’t like those old men who frequented hostess bars and got huffy when the girl they had their

eye on wouldn’t stop by their seats. Eris slept beside me, and that was more than enough. If I got truly desperate, I had a little memento from Roxy tucked in my pocket as well.

It wasn’t as though I trusted all the members of Amazons, either. There was a possibility one of the Man-God’s disciples could be hidden among them. For that reason, I decided Eris and I would take turns on our own lookout duty rather than leave it entirely to the Amazons.

Eris planted herself on the ground, back against a tree, her sword cradled in her arms as she drifted off to sleep. Ruijerd used to sleep like that, in that same cool heroic pose. I wondered when she’d picked up that habit. Her face was surprisingly relaxed as she slept. I was used to seeing her disciplined expression even when she was fast asleep, but for some reason she was all smiles tonight.

Maybe she’s having a really good dream. The Eris I knew now was standoffish and didn’t really share her emotions, but at her core, she was no different from before. As heartening as it was to see her mature, it was a bit sad, too.

It was about time for me to tap out and let her stand watch. I almost didn’t have the heart to wake her.

“You’re doing a good job staying awake,” Sara commented as she plopped down beside me. She had two mugs in her hands with towers of steam rising from them. She held one of them out toward me, grunting as if that would be enough for me to understand that I should take it.

“Thanks,” I said, deciding to oblige her. Inside the mug was a relatively opaque red liquid. I’d never seen anything like it before. It didn’t look like tomato soup. When I took a whiff, the smell nearly burned my nostrils. Whatever it was, I suspected it was spicy. “What *is* this exactly?”

“Alisa’s special soup to ward off drowsiness.”

Uh-huh, some kinda anti-sleep tonic… There’s no poison in this, is there?

“Well,” I said, “I’ll gladly have some, then.”

I couldn’t very well perform detoxification magic right in front of her. She’d really be disgusted with me if I did. Instead, I decided to sip gingerly and test it.

I let only the smallest amount drip over my tongue, which was just enough for the savory flavor to spread through my mouth. It was only after I had swallowed it down that a belated tingling sensation lingered. I had imagined something fiery hot, but surprisingly, it wasn’t all that spicy. Several seconds later, I felt a warm sensation in my stomach and throat—like the gentle burn of ginger tea.

“It’s delicious.”

Sara grinned. “Right?” She began sipping on her soup as well.

Yes, ma’am. But don’t you think you’re sitting a mite close? If either of us were to lean ever so slightly closer, our shoulders might brush against one another. …Nah. I was probably being too self-conscious.

“Say, Rudeus…” Sara began. “What’re you doing right now?”

“What do you mean?”

At the moment, I was experiencing heart palpitations because I was sitting super close to a girl. *Okay, come on, get it together.* Yes, I had three wives already. I fully understood how inappropriate it would be to commit adultery. I was also trying to keep a vow of celibacy at the moment. Could anyone genuinely blame me for

feeling a little flustered over a beautiful woman sitting so close? I shoved my hand in my pocket, squeezing the fabric inside as I prayed. *God, give me strength!*

"I mean, I figured you were still in Sharia doing research with the Magicians' Guild or something like that. Or that you were working as a professor, teaching people magic."

"Me? A professor?"

"You were good at teaching magic, remember?"

Was I? Had I taught Sara any magic? I couldn't remember.

Sara went on, "Or I figured maybe you were in Asura Kingdom, working as Princess Ariel's bodyguard alongside your wife. Wait, I guess she took the crown a couple of years ago, huh? I wasn't in Asura for all of that, so I've got no idea."

"Yes. I did help her succeed the throne."

"So, you did help… But it's not like you're serving directly under her or anything."

Ohh. So that's what she meant when she asked what I'm doing right now.

"I'm serving under someone else," I said.

"Someone else?"

"Dragon God Orsted."

"Dragon God…? One of the Seven Great Powers?"

Oh, I guess she knows about them. They're not all that famous among adventurers, in my experience… That's surprising.

I nodded. "That's right. I work as his underling, supporting his goals around the world."

"So you're his servant? How in the world did you wind up in that kind of position? Did you submit an application or something and win him over? Like, 'I swear I'll be of use to you, so please make me your subordinate!' Something like that?"

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got time. You’re not going to sleep yet, are you?”

I’d intended to switch off with Eris here pretty soon, but…oh, well.

“I guess not. Well, where to start…”

From there, I launched into my story. I began by telling her about the Man-God, and how I’d taken his advice as I traveled. That one day, the Man-God had advised me to go check my basement. How that triggered my future self to come stop me, telling me it would ruin our entire family if I did as the Man-God bid.

But it was already too late.

The Man-God threatened my family’s safety, forcing me into a direct confrontation with Dragon God Orsted. I did everything I could to take him down, but I couldn’t beat him. I was instead left to plead for my life, imploring him to at least save my family. He had refused me, but then Eris swooped in to my rescue. I was nearly dead when Orsted proposed I join his side instead, and I agreed.

“That kicked off my career as his secret operative. I did my best to help put Ariel on the throne in Asura, took part in the war in the Shirone Kingdom, kidnapped the Blessed Child in Millis, and became a princess on the Demon Continent…”

“What about that Geese fellow you mentioned this afternoon?” Sara asked.

“He’s one of the Man-God’s underlings,” I explained. “Right now, I’m trying to cobble together enough offensive power to take him out. One part of that is recruiting North God Kalman.”

“Hmmm…”

I hadn’t noticed when, but I’d drained the rest of the soup in my mug. I had water magic at my disposal, however, so my throat wouldn’t go dry.

“Sounds like it was a good thing for you, meeting up with Orsted.”

I nodded. “You’re right. I sure am glad to have met him.”

“What kind of person is he? The way you talk about him, he sounds like a really nice guy with an open mind.”

“Well, if I were to describe him in the most succinct way possible…” I thought back to all my memories of Orsted. Of when we first established our office, when we ventured to the Kingdom of Asura together, when Cliff and I worked to find a way to combat his curse (or rather, created the helmet to contain it)… Above all, the one thing that stood out in my memory was… “He’s got a scary face.”

Sara burst into laughter.

It was true, though. Yes, Orsted was kind, magnanimous, and broad-minded, but no one could deny he had a scary face. The constant in every memory I had of him was that permanent scowl.

“Pfft… Hehe… Ahaha! What the heck… This guy’s really looked out for you, and all you can say about him is how scary his face is?”

I frowned. “I mean it, he really does. Everyone hates him because of his curse, too.”

“Bwahaha!”

Sara must have found this truly hilarious because for the next few minutes she continued cackling, arms wrapped around her stomach. The only reason she stifled it at all was to avoid waking those who were fast asleep around us.

“Oh, *man*,” she said at last when she’d calmed down.

“The whole reason I was able to patch things up with Eris was thanks to my fight with Orsted. In a way, Sir Orsted’s kind of like my own personal cupid.”

Sara quirked a brow at me. “A cupid with a scary face?”

“You got it.”

Sara was racked by another fit of giggles that left her choking and coughing. *Is it* that *funny? I don’t understand these kids and their newfangled humor.*

“Phew,” she breathed out at last, having recomposed herself. She turned her gaze toward me. Perhaps it was only the light of the bonfire dancing on her cheeks, but it looked as if she was blushing.

Maybe she’s about to admit to having feelings for me… If she does, I’ll have to let her down. Suavely, of course, like a proper man. I already have two wives and a husband, after all. Despite cracking jokes to myself to ease my tension, my whole body froze up in anticipation.

“You sure have changed, Rudeus,” Sara went on. “Even more than since you were the princess’s bodyguard.”

Her eyes misted over. Wow, she was bewitching. My breathing quickened, beads of sweat trickling down my forehead. I shoved my hand into my pocket again, clenching the holy relic within in a tight fist.

“Oh, would you look at the time?” Sara said suddenly, interrupting the moment. “Looks like we got lost in conversation. It’s about time for me to tag out with the next watch.”

“Uh, yeah. Right.”

She immediately pulled away.

I breathed a big sigh of relief.

For some reason, the moment the atmosphere around us shifted in a more intimate direction, my whole body seized up. Lingering trauma from my failure to perform, perhaps.

Someone suddenly plonked themselves on the log beside me, on the opposite side of where Sara had been moments earlier. I could tell instantly who it was without even glancing in her direction; I’d felt her gaze on me for a while now.

“Eris, how long have you been awake?” I asked.

“Since you said that stuff about Orsted being cupid.”

“What would you think, if he really had been our matchmaker?”

“Gross.”

Oof, that was blunt. But maybe it was a given for someone under the effects of Orsted’s curse.

“But if he’s why we got together, then…I-I guess I could be grateful to him,” she admitted reluctantly, leaning her head against my shoulder.

Ahh, I can feel the love.

“Eris?”

“What.” It sounded more like a statement than a question. Typical Eris.

“Let me rest my head in your lap.”

“Fine.”

I adjusted my position, placing my head on top of her thighs. The stiffness I’d felt in my body moments earlier disappeared. I was no longer covered in a cold sweat, either. Maybe Eris had sensed I was being driven into a corner and swooped in to rescue me.

“I’ll keep watch until morning. You can sleep until then,” Eris said.

“Mm. Thanks.”

Eris’s thighs were a little firm to make a good pillow, but they brought me comfort. My little man down south seemed to sense the danger had passed and eagerly lifted his head, but danger or not, he wasn’t going to see any action. *Behave yourself,* I scolded him, as if he weren’t me.

With that, I fell fast asleep.

***

As we made our way down the highway the next morning, we spotted a monolith jutting up into the sky, large enough we could see it even from a distance. As we grew closer, the smoke that curled up from the base of it came into focus. A town. This was Hammerpolka, which lay on the edge of the Markien Mercenary Country.

When we approached the entrance, we spotted a metal sign standing beside it. It read: *Hammerpolka, the Smithing Town*. Indeed, Hammerpolka's smithing industry was thriving. Beneath the towering monolith lay deposits of top-quality minerals, which the townspeople processed into ore. With this, they did a healthy trade with other countries.

As we entered the town, the banging of metal echoed all around us, much like you'd find in a dwarven settlement. Despite this, few referred to this place as a smithing town in practice. They called it Hammerpolka, the Mercenary Town.

If it wasn't obvious from the name, an enormous mercenary band founded this nation. They'd worked as merchants of death, selling their services to (or practicing them on) their neighbors.

In this economy, Hammerpolka was responsible for the production of military equipment. It was a great place for the mercenaries of the country to get suited up. Eventually, foreign mercenaries also came here for the same purpose. Almost all of the world's most famous mercenary bands made their headquarters here.

Ruquag's Mercenary Band was an exception to that rule, as you might expect. What, you think we have a way to go before we're world famous? Well, maybe. But with Aisha handling it and subcontracting work out, we would get there eventually.

As expected of a town that outfitted mercenaries, a bunch of rough-looking people walked its streets. The atmosphere wasn't nearly as oppressive as the Sword Sanctum, though, perhaps

because this was a relatively safe area. Or it could be because I considered mercenaries to be more level-headed.

Not to say I think Sword God-style swordsmen incapable of basic human conversation, just so we're clear. It's just…they have a tendency to use their swords before their words.

Many of the men we saw on the street stole glances at Eris. She would glare back at them, but rather than interpret that as a challenge and pick a fight with her, they would smirk and walk off. We were safe for the moment, but there was no telling when someone would be stupid enough to provoke her. I was terrified we'd have a massacre on our hands if that happened.

"I was worried you were too confident about how smoothly our trip would go, but it looks like we're here safe and sound." Sara stopped walking suddenly. "You've brought us far enough. You know, you really saved our asses."

"You sure this is as far as you need me to take you? I could see you out of the Conflict Zone if you want."

She scoffed, "Even though we can't pay you? Don't joke."

"Come on. It's not like we're strangers. You could always pay me with your body if it bothers you that much." I flashed a smarmy grin, hoping to get a rise out of her. I even made a groping gesture with my hands. All of the Amazons blanched and grimaced at me.

Eris snatched my wrist and glowered at me.

"I-I was only kidding," I squeaked at her.

"Yeah, I know," said Sara. "You already had your chance last night."

"Seriously, Sara, could you stop? She's gonna shatter the bones in my hand at this rate." I gently wrapped a hand around Eris's, coaxing her to stop crushing my wrist, and she finally pulled away.

"We're not children. We can take it from here," Sara assured me.

“All right.”

“Besides, seems like you’ve got your own stuff to worry about. We’ll excuse ourselves here, so we don’t get in your way.”

Get in my way, huh… True, if Geese were in this town, there’d be a battle. I couldn’t risk getting Sara and the rest of her party wrapped up in that.

“Even if I did wanna hire you as a bodyguard, my body wouldn’t be enough for you anyway,” Sara said.

I wanted to reassure her that wasn’t true, but judging by what happened last night, she was probably right. Her body wouldn’t work as payment.

“Then this is it,” I said.

Sara nodded. “Yep. I was glad to see you again after all this time.”

“Me too.”

“You sure have changed a lot. I dunno how to put it…you seem more distinguished than before.”

I tilted my head. “I don’t really see how.”

“No, like, I mean…you know. Remember back when the two of us almost got involved? I’ve been an adventurer ever since, always doing the same thing, never changing…”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I muttered. As much as she downplayed it, she seemed far more mature than I remembered. More of an adult.

The more I talked to her, the more I realized the subtle differences. We had only spent a couple of days together, but I was sure if I spent a whole month with her, I’d notice even more. Everyone changes, even if they find it hard to see in themselves.

For a little bit, Sara just stared at the ground. I wondered if I should say something to her, and if so, what. While I was busy

waffling back and forth, she seemed to resolve herself, suddenly lifting her head.

“Okay, I’ve made up my mind! I’m gonna retire from being an adventurer!”

“Wha—?!”

Sara’s sudden declaration prompted the other Amazons to let out an almost hysterical cry.

She didn’t deign to look back at them, but I kind of thought she should. They were her party members, y’know? She should be saying this to their faces.

“What are you going to do if you quit adventuring?” I asked. “Do you have some other job you want to do or something?”

“Nope, no plans. Figure I’ll find myself a man somewhere, settle down, have kids, and live out my days hunting or something.”

Sounded like kind of a detailed plan, actually, but I wasn’t going to contradict her.

“Well, you are beautiful. I only worry some awful guy will take advantage of you,” I said.

“Heh, don’t worry. I’m gonna find me a guy who won’t go off to a brothel, get totally hammered, and then badmouth the crap outta me.”

“Ouch.”

That reference should have stung, but to my surprise, we each smiled, sharing the same moment of nostalgia. It was a misunderstanding spurred on by my own crappy actions following my erectile dysfunction, so perhaps I had no business laughing. But if Sara forgave me enough to laugh about it, I’d laugh along with her.

“Well,” I said, “if you ever find yourself in trouble, send for me and I’ll come.”

Sara nodded. “Yep. And I will, if I need to.”

“Then, see ya.”

“Yep. Goodbye, Rudeus.”

Sara gave me a brief wave before setting off toward the center of the town. The rest of the Amazons chased after her. I heard the echo of their voices as they demanded she explain what she meant by retiring. They’d soon settle at an inn and have a good squabble over her leaving.

Despite appearances, Sara was very single-minded—or bullheaded, if you wanted to be a little less charitable—so I doubted anyone could dissuade her from retiring if she’d made up her mind. Once she and the others made it out of the Conflict Zone, they’d either disband or find a way to stick together without her. Either way, Sara’d soon begin her new life.

My only hope was that, unlike a certain someone I knew, she wouldn’t try to go venturing into a labyrinth by herself to find a man.

I didn’t know when I would next see Sara again, or if I ever would. If I did, I hoped we’d be able to talk again like this. I also swore that next time, I would ask her about herself too, rather than ramble on and on about my life.

That’s where we left it.

Chapter 9:
A North God, a Mercenary, and More…

AFTER PARTING WITH Sara and her party, we decided to look for the missionary knight we had encountered earlier in our trip. North God Kalman may no longer be in this town, but we did have information indicating that someone resembling Geese was. I doubted it was him. Nonetheless, following up on the lead could nab us some valuable information.

There was also the possibility it was a trap to lure me in. *Though I gotta say, I don't see Geese laying a trap like this. It was a total coincidence we came across this information, so it'd be pretty tenuous to build a plan around that.*

I wouldn't expect him to try something funny when the North God already had a high chance of being one of the Man-God's disciples, meaning I was braced and ready for a potential fight. No, he'd wait for a moment when I was more relaxed. He'd want me to have my guard down before coming at me.

Nah, I told myself, *that's more the Man-God's style than Geese's.*

Whatever the case, the Missionary Knights here in Hammerpolka should've already apprehended the individual who supposedly resembled (or was) Geese. Our first order of business was to find them. The problem was I had no idea where their offices were.

I sure screwed up there. I should've asked where I could meet up with them when I arrived. Should I just look for something that resembles an office? Or ask a passerby to see if anyone else knows?

"I already told ya, I'm not sellin' out my pals."

As we wandered the streets, I happened to overhear a voice up ahead. It was a low, almost bestial growl, full of resolve. *I swear I've heard this voice somewhere before…*

"I have no intention of paying you. In the name of Millis, I am demanding you hand this demon over," echoed another voice, righteous and self-assured.

As I got closer, I realized there were two groups squared off on either side of the street, glowering at one another. One side, I assumed, was a group of mercenaries. There was no uniformity in their armor or weapons, with each person outfitted according to their own personal style. On the other side, everyone was clad in the same silver armor, engraved with the Millis emblem. The knights had only ten people. The mercenary band outnumbered them two to one.

In spite of this, the Missionary Knights showed no intention of backing down. I figured part of that was their unwavering confidence in their own strength. Moreover, they had absolute faith in the righteousness of their cause.

"Yeah? Then let me spell it out for ya a different way: I don't backstab my pals."

Standing on the side of the mercenaries was a man who looked like a regular street thug who'd slid into adulthood without any change in lifestyle. He had sharp, narrowed eyes and a familiar face. It looked older than I remembered. He'd even grown a mustache, too.

"Mister Soldat!" I cried as the realization hit me.

Yes, this was most definitely Soldat Heckler. Hard to believe that after running into Sara, I would find another familiar face. I owed him a heck of a lot. When my ED problem first reared its head, he'd done a lot to look after me. It sure brought back memories, seeing him and Sara.

"Hm?" Soldat grunted at me, narrowing his eyes. "Who're… hey, hold it. I recognize that face."

“It’s been a while,” I said.

“Yeah. But I’m busy, kid. Save it for later.” With that, he turned his attention back toward the Missionary Knights.

Not satisfied at being waved off, I pressed him, “Uh, explain what’s going on?”

“Hm? These guys just suddenly showed up outta nowhere, demandin’ we hand one of our own over. Even though we ain’t done nothin’!”

I nodded thoughtfully. “So that’s it. If you haven’t done anything, what is the issue with handing him over? The Missionary Knights aren’t going to threaten anybody without a good reason.”

“Ya dummy. Course they would. These are Millis’s Missionary Knights, and they want us to hand over a demon. Even if they don’t kill him, I wouldn’t put it past ’em to take one or two of his eyes.”

Ah, so that’s what’s going on. These Missionary Knights were here under my orders then, and the other side was refusing to abide by their demands. Soldat did kinda have a point. If a group of demon expulsionists dragged off their comrade, he might not come back in one piece.

Perhaps I’d been too hasty. It hadn’t even occurred to me—or maybe it had crossed my mind, but I’d thought I didn’t really mind if they gave Geese a beatdown.

I never imagined it would be one of Soldat’s companions, though. Hmm… I guess if Soldat and Geese are in cahoots, I’ll have to face him as well. I didn’t like that idea.

“Who’s the demon they’re trying to take?” I asked.

“Him, over there.” Soldat motioned by jerking his chin. I looked, and there was a demon there with the face of a monkey.

“What the hell do you want?” the man in question snarled at me.

Nah, that's not him. Their faces are similar, but this guy's way more ripped than Geese. He was more of a warrior than a swordsman. He resembled Goliade way more than Geese.

Given the tense situation, I could see some fear in the man's eyes. He knew they were up against the Missionary Knights, but he stood his ground with a weapon in hand, ready to fight. He was the exact opposite of Geese in every way; Geese was lanky and unassuming, the type to flee at the first hint of danger. This guy was a gorilla. Geese was more of a chimpanzee.

I wonder if they're from the same tribe. Although, pretty sure Geese is supposedly the only surviving member of the Nuka Tribe.

"You," I said, "what's your name and tribe?"

"I'm Glanze of the Rokka Tribe! And I ain't afraid just 'cause you guys are the Missionary Knights!"

Dude, don't kid yourself. You're so terrified your knees are knocking together. Never mind, it'll be okay. We'll clear all this up in a second.

"And you have no affiliation with Geese of the Nuka Tribe?"

Glanze pulled a face. "Geese? Well, yeah, guess I did used to be in a party with the guy, but… Hold it. Don't tell me he's gone and started crap again?! I'm so sick of this! Just 'cause the two of us look alike, how come I gotta be mistaken for him all the time?! The Rokka Tribe's not even a demon tribe! It's a beast tribe!"

Well, anyway, he wasn't Geese. If anything, he was a fellow victim of his trickery. Finding Geese here would have been too easy.

"All right, I understand. Allow me to speak to them," I said.

"Speak to 'em?" Soldat scowled. "They ain't the type to listen to —h-hey?!"

I turned away from him and toward the Missionary Knights, scanning their faces. Which of them was the knight I had encountered earlier during our trip? It was impossible to tell since they were all wearing helmets with drawn visors.

“Pardon me, but which of you did I meet with recently?”

“That would be me,” said one of them. “Pardon, but are you acquainted with this man?”

I nodded. “Coincidentally, yes, I am. And if I might add, the demon they have with them is not the one I am looking for.”

“He’s not?” The man seemed puzzled, as if he couldn’t comprehend how that could be possible. He was a demon, right?

Demon or beast, whatever the man is, he’s not Geese.

“He claims he’s not a demon but a beastfolk anyway. Regardless of the misunderstanding, I appreciate your assistance in this matter,” I said.

There. Problem solved! Satisfied, I pressed a fist to my chest and lowered my head to the man. He and the rest of the Missionary Knights did the same before taking their leave.

“Looks like you’ve become more charming since I last saw ya,” Soldat commented, looking a little exasperated in the wake of it all.

“Charming”? All I had really done was clean up the mess I’d gotten them into. Regardless, we had confirmed my suspicions: the man spotted in Hammerpolka was not Geese.

***

Soldat was the leader of an adventurer party called Stepped Leader, which operated under the clan Thunderbolt. Clan Thunderbolt happened to be one of the biggest adventurer clans in the entire world. It had recently ordered all of its members to gather here in Hammerpolka.

Anyone would wonder why an enormous clan like Thunderbolt was gathering here. Before going into it, however, we must first consider why such enormous clans are formed in the first place. It was pretty simple, really—mercenary companies were one of the few

stable, secure business ventures in this world. Most clans were formed to provide mutual support between parties. What requests one party couldn't complete on their own could be shared between affiliated parties. This method also presented less danger for those involved.

Thunderbolt's founding began when three S-rank parties operating in the Three Magic Nations decided to join hands with one another to conquer a labyrinth. This venture was wildly successful, catapulting their new clan to fame. They continued to work seamlessly together, growing their numbers until they could start clearing multiple labyrinths at once.

I'd been through a labyrinth or two myself. I could say from experience that if you wanted to tackle a particularly difficult labyrinth, you'd need a highly experienced S-rank party full of warriors with trained good judgment, equipped with the best possible armor and weapons, and with backup waiting in the wings.

Having said all this, it wasn't always possible to be perfectly prepared for those labyrinths. There weren't enough hours in the day for each individual adventurer to carry on their regular lives while maintaining their equipment, planning their daily schedule and subsequent forays, and do all the elaborate preparations required for dungeon venturing. A party could only reasonably expect to go into labyrinths once every couple of months.

I say that, but there were those who managed to conquer labyrinths with the bare minimum: sub-par equipment, a haphazard plan, and sloppy preparations. If they were fortunate, they could even find some magic items that'd go for a good price once they returned. More frequently, however, failure meant death.

So, a question: what could a group of adventurers do to stay in optimal condition so that they could explore these difficult labyrinths and guarantee they'd make it to the depths? If you guessed *form a large clan*, bingo! You're right. Many hands lighten the load.

A clan would have one party specialized in battle that would head to the lower recesses of the labyrinth. Using the information they brought back, another party would conduct a more thorough search of the upper levels, slaying any monsters they found on their path. Finally, there would be a support party in charge of planning, organizing information, money management, and maintaining the other parties' equipment. By breaking down the task into smaller chunks, these parties could work with machine-like efficiency to clean out an entire labyrinth. Clans made all this coordination possible. That was why S-rank adventurers formed or joined these enormous clans.

However, it should be said that clans weren't all sunshine and roses. Large-scale clans had their downsides.

The larger a clan's family became—as it gained more and more members with specialized abilities—the higher their expenses grew. This could be defrayed by the profit of cleaning out a labyrinth, assuming they were always successful. The money earned from selling a single magic crystal found in the deepest parts of a labyrinth could, in some situations, net you enough to afford a lavish mansion in the Asura Kingdom. If they were really fortunate, they might even find some magic items along the way. A good haul could feed hundreds for an entire year.

It wasn't a sure thing, though. They couldn't completely clear out a labyrinth each and every time. Other clans might beat them to it, or their S-rank vanguard team might get wiped out, or they might run out of funding midway through. There were any number of reasons, really, but all of them resulted in a clan going into the red.

These were the issues that plagued any clan leader. As eager as they were to explore labyrinths, they eventually ran out of funds, and without funding, they couldn't send their people in. A clan's whole purpose was to provide a stable environment to earn money, and yet they would wind up plagued with financial problems themselves. An ironic problem to have, really, but that's life. Nothing ever goes according to plan.

So, how does a large-scale clan solve this cash flow problem? The most reliable method was to have each party under their command take on requests and extract a certain percentage of the earnings for the clan's coffers. Alternatively, they could take on other requests that required numerous parties to complete. Slaying straggler Wyrms, for instance.

There was one final option for these large-scale clans: exclusive requests from national governments or big-time merchants. The trading boats that ventured between the Demon Continent and the Millis Continent were a great example. They always had bodyguards on board with them, adventurers who'd signed exclusive contracts with the shipyards. One large-scale clan had taken all those positions in West Port and East Port themselves. The clan would rotate out members, making money for themselves through bodyguard work between missions into labyrinths.

Let's consider Thunderbolt and their financial situation specifically. They were one of the top clans in the Northern Territories, with contracts tying them to large enterprises in each of the Three Nations and the Magicians' Guild as well. They had a lot of connections, but that came with a lot of obligations to folks who didn't necessarily all get along. A lot of relationships to manage. And that was its own challenge.

How did they tackle it? Putting it plainly: whenever a clan retrieved a magic item from a labyrinth, they needed to decide whether to sell it to the Magicians' Guild or one of their merchant contacts. To avoid unnecessary friction, they limited themselves to how many wealthy patrons they contracted with and which territories they conducted labyrinth explorations in. Even so, their members continued to grow until they had over fifty parties and five hundred clan members.

The leader needed to try to balance avoiding bankruptcy while still ensuring each of his members was provided for. A cold outside assessment might suggest they disband entirely or scale back

operations. However, it took courage to relinquish an army of that size once you'd assumed control of it.

The clan leader anguished over what to do. Tried everything. Nothing provided a lasting solution, so he was forced to make a call. There was only one job which would allow him to feed all five hundred of his members and keep open the possibility of future labyrinth exploration: mercenary business. It wasn't an outlandish choice. Killing people was out of most adventurers' wheelhouses, but adventuring had taught many of them the necessary skills, experience, and judgment to be deadly in a fight. This was what led Thunderbolt to fuse into a cross between an adventurer clan and a mercenary clan without specializing in one or the other.

There were those in the clan who withdrew their membership, unwilling to leave the Northern Territories they called home to venture all the way into the Conflict Zone. The parties at the core of Thunderbolt, however, followed their leader every step of the way. Soldat's Stepped Leader was no exception. From the way he explained it, their days consisted of labyrinth exploration and battle.

"It really ain't all that bad," he said. "There's a never-ending need for mercenaries here, and we've got all the funding we need. In these past couple years we've cleared out five whole labyrinths."

I'd followed Soldat back to Thunderbolt's clan room, where he filled me in on all the details, welcoming us in as if we were members ourselves. He spoke as dispassionately as ever, as if his work were a distant memory, his voice somehow simultaneously bored and curt.

Soldat continued, "But there are some guys here who really can't hack it. Cutting down bandits that attack you on the highways and killing people for a living are two different things, see. Lot of 'em plan to scrounge up what money they can through labyrinth exploration, then retire and hightail it back home."

None of the Stepped Leaders I remembered from my time with them remained. They'd either retired or died. Considering all they had done for me, I felt a prickle of grief.

“What about you, Mister Soldat? You’re not going to retire?” I asked.

His mouth dropped halfway open. “Huh…?” Then he snorted with laughter. “I’ve thought about it, but…the opportunity’s already passed me by. I’ll either die doing what I’m doing, or lose an arm, find myself unable to do the work any longer, and keel over in a ditch somewhere. That’s all fate’s got in store for me.”

He sounded dismissive, as if he didn’t care what happened to him, but he’d said these same sorts of things back when I palled around with him.

I stroked my chin. “Really? The truth is you feel obligated to look after the newbies. Am I wrong?”

“Oh? Look at you, hitting the bullseye like that. When you were just a brat, you’d never have noticed that kinda thing. But I guess you have gotten hitched, huh? Got a bit more confidence since you solved your downstairs problem and made yourself a kid or two, huh? That it?” Soldat demanded as he playfully wrapped his arm around my neck and ground his fist into my scalp.

“Ow, ow!”

Man, this takes me back.

“So, what brings you to this neck of the woods? This ain’t no place for a married man.”

“Yeah, well, it’ll be a long story if you want the full details, but…” I gave him a quick rundown of the events that led me here. “And so here I am, hoping to bring North God Kalman the Third into the fold. All part of a greater plan.”

“Huh, so you’re this Dragon God Orsted’s underling now. Well, you always were a cut above the rest. Guess that ain’t too surprising.” Soldat looked a little surprised at this development, but at the same time, he didn’t doubt me. “If it’s North God Kalman you’re after, there definitely was a guy who fit the bill around here a couple of years ago.”

“Oh, really? And where has he gone?”

Soldat shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I don’t know any more than that.”

Yeah, I figured he’d say that.

“I met with him a number of times. Strange guy. He was up there in age, but he sure had a lot of energy. He was trying to teach our younger members swordsmanship.”

“Yeah?”

“He was very precise about it all, too. You could tell it was the North God Style he was usin’, but even without a sword in his hand, he was still ridiculously strong. I figured he was some kinda big deal. Makes sense if he was the North God.”

Hm? Wait a second. Isn’t North God Kalman the Third supposed to have an unquenchable thirst for recognition? He was also supposed to be in possession of an incredible great sword which he’d received from his father. If he was hiding his name, sealing his sword away, and spending time teaching martial arts to young men… That had to be Kalman the Second and not Kalman the Third, right? *What’s going on…?*

On reflection, it might not be that crazy after all. Not to delve into chaos theory or anything, but many of my actions in the world had a ripple effect, changing what various other people were supposed to have been doing during this loop. It wasn’t strange to think that North God Kalman the Second had wound up here, where his son was originally supposed to be. According to Orsted, father and son had very similar fates.

“I see,” I said thoughtfully. “Thank you for the information.”

Again, we’d struck out. The same bad luck as when we’d gone to meet the Sword God. This was becoming a trend. Sure, one might argue things had gone a little bit *too* smoothly up until this point, but I couldn’t help feeling a little panicky after failing to fulfill my objective

twice in a row. I doubted Geese's preparations were encountering this kind of difficulty.

"Well, since it looks like we're out of luck, I'll be heading home," I announced.

Soldat shook his head. "Instant roundtrip, eh? How about you stick around and take it easy? We'd welcome you here."

"Unfortunately, I'm a busy man."

"Makes sense, what with you being a Dragon God's underling. Awfully distinguished now, ain't you? I'll be countin' on you to hook me up once I retire from the whole adventurin' business."

"Oh, in that case, I actually have a whole organization under my command—Ruquag's Mercenary Band. We're more geared toward fulfilling miscellaneous errands for people than actual mercenary work. You'd be more than welcome to join us. In fact, you should come back with us now. No need to wait until retirement!"

Perhaps it wasn't the best idea to invite him without consulting Aisha first, but we could surely work something out. Even if Aisha were to nix it, I could employ him somewhere else. He could join the Orsted Corporation. Our company had its eyes on the future, and we'd welcome new blood in our ranks. Soldat was tough and had a habit of looking after others. We could do with more people like him.

Alas, he wasn't up for it.

"I know I was the one who brought it up, but I'll have to turn ya down. I may not seem like the most respectable fella, but I've got men who look up to me."

I pretty much expected he'd say something like that. This was the same guy who'd stood in the firing line to defend one of his comrades earlier today, even though the fearsome Missionary Knights themselves were bearing the rifles. He had somewhere he belonged already. Something he thought was worth protecting.

"I'll be dependin' on you to make good on your word if I ever get driven outta here. When that happens, I'll probably be down one

arm. So I might be totally useless to ya."

I smiled. "Hey, so what if you are? I don't mind. I'll be waiting for you."

"Keh." Soldat gave a disinterested snort of laughter, as if he didn't truly believe I meant it. Beneath all that bravado, though, I could sense my words meant something to him.

This dynamic brought back memories, and with them, joy.

"Well, anyhow, you sure have surprised me, bein' all grown now when you were just some clueless brat before. I remember how you drowned yourself in so much liquor back then, I thought you'd kill yourself. Your face was a mess of tears and snot when I took you to that brothel, too."

Uh-oh. I wish you wouldn't bring that up.

"What's all this about?" Eris demanded.

See? I knew she wouldn't let that go.

"Oh, story time, is it?"

"Um, Mister Soldat, maybe we should drop this and—"

"Sure, why not. Ain't like you're bothered by what happened all those years ago, right? That whole saga's a big hit with the other guys in the mercenary band," Soldat said.

The story of my utter failure is a big hit, huh?

Eris's brows furrowed, her frown deepening. "What saga?"

"'Bout this fella here. Dunno what they call him now, but when he was an adventurer, he introduced himself as Quagmire Rudeus. He'd smile at everyone, actin' all formal and bein' super polite. All that in spite of bein' a first-rate adventurer. No exaggeration, either. He took down a Red Wyrm straggler all by himself."

Er, I didn't give myself that name. Or *introduce myself that way. Nor did I defeat that straggler all on my own. But…I guess these kinds of stories do benefit from a little embellishment.*

“Back when he was still debating what to call himself—when our Quagmire here was still nothin’ more than a little puddle—forget bein’ a charmer, he wouldn’t even hardly talk to no one. Wasn’t any smilin’ neither, almost like he’d lost the ability to form one while he was still in his mama’s womb. Nah, what he wore was this ridiculous empty grin on his face, almost like it was some cheap mask he’d found in the markets and slapped on. Craziest thing was that you could still see it in his eyes—he was lookin’ down on everyone around him, almost like he thought he was the most miserable guy in the whole world, and none of us’d ever understand.”

I kept my mouth shut as he rambled.

“Depressin’ little brat, he was. I didn’t like him.” Soldat paused there for a moment, as if he’d suddenly remembered the hostility he’d shown me back then. He glanced at me briefly, gave a short snort of laughter, then turned back to Eris. “Anyhow, that’s the kinda kid he was. Then, one day, he showed up at the bar me and the rest of Stepped Leader frequented. He started knocking back drinks almost like he was a full-fledged adult. Really got under my skin. Can’t explain exactly what it was that infuriated me so much, just didn’t like him. So I sidled up to him, figuring I’d tease him a little. The kid didn’t have the guts to take me on.”

I shot a worried glance at Eris. She was listening silently, but there was a dangerous gleam in her eyes. It wasn’t like I was expecting her to suddenly whip out her blade and cut the man down or anything, but I wouldn’t put it past her to take a swing at Soldat.

“Outta nowhere, the kid socked me in the face. He was drunk, sure, but on top of that, we’re talkin’ about a mage clocking a swordsman. I didn’t strike him back though, ’cause Quagmire here was bawlin’ like a baby. How could a respected, upstanding fella like me raise my hands against a brat who was crying and taking a wild swing? Ain’t no way.”

“Right,” Eris said, her voice a low growl.

Oh, she's angry, isn't she? I sure wish Soldat would leave well enough alone and stop there.

On the other hand, this story wasn't entirely meant to mock me; by the end, Soldat was looking me in the eye. That's why I was hopeful I could follow Soldat's tale with a little clarification on his intent to pacify her. Assuming, of course, she didn't clobber him midway through, which she might.

"When I asked him what it was all about, he told me this was the girl he'd been getting chummy with. Right as the two of them were about to do the deed together, he found he couldn't get it up—girl before this one had abandoned him and left him traumatized. Pretty rich, ain't it? Here's the guy who'd taken down a straggler all on his own and he couldn't perform in the bedroom."

Eris said nothing to that, and nor did I.

"Still, I'm a big softy. I wanted to do something for Quagmire to help him recover. Oh, but just so we're clear, I ain't sayin' I touched him, okay? I don't go for other dudes… Hey, that's a joke. You're suppos'ta laugh at that part."

"Ahaha! Don't worry. You're not my type either." I forced a laugh and responded to him on Eris's behalf. Meanwhile, the atmosphere around Eris herself had grown tense and oppressive. I imagined I could hear static crackling in the air.

"Movin' on, then. So I decided I'd get him fixed up, and the two of us took off to visit a brothel. See, I figured this kinda stuff is better left up to the pros. I tossed him into a high-quality brothel and retreated to a pub, waiting for the good news. I've got no idea what he got up to in the brothel—or rather, what he tried to get up. Whatever happened, didn't work. He was a broken man who'd never be able to stand again. Or at least parts of him wouldn't."

Ah, another punchline. You're supposed to laugh here, Miss Eris. Come on, give us a smile. No more of that murderous glaring.

"If even the pros couldn't fix him, I knew there was nothin' I could do. We spent the night knocking back more ale. But we

haven't even gotten to the best part yet—just wait. See, as we were headed back, he was groping one of the ladies from the brothel, sayin', 'A lady with some bounce in her breasts is way better than some flat-chested chick.' Just happened, though, that girl from his party was right nearby. Yep, the very one he'd tried and failed to get intimate with."

Yes, I remembered that episode all too well. Not the part about me groping anyone's breasts, though. We had left the brothel and were headed back by that point.

"Smack!" Soldat verbalized, pantomiming the gesture comically. "'Never show me your face again!'" It was actually pretty entertaining watching him recount this. I could tell he'd had plenty of practice.

"There you have it. Having been completely rejected, Quagmire resolved himself to the single life of an adventurer."

When Soldat finished up his story, chuckles echoed through the room from the other members who'd listened in on his tale. I almost laughed myself, carried along by their momentum.

Guess it'd be more correct to call it nostalgic rather than entertaining, though. So much happened after all of that. Upon splitting up with Sara, I went to the University of Magic, met Sylphie (who solved my downstairs issue), reunited with Roxy, and lost Paul in that labyrinth. I had four children now. Only a few years had passed, and so much had changed.

"It really brings back memories," I said.

"Sure does. I was still young myself back then. Had no good reason for butting my nose into your business, but I did," said Soldat.

I shot him a look. "Seems to me like you aren't much different now. Unless I'm mistaken."

"Haha! You've got some nerve, you little twerp!" Again he slung his arm around my neck, grinding his fist into my scalp. It didn't take long for him to come back to his senses and glance in Eris's

direction. “Come to think of it, I guess this ain’t really a tale for this redheaded beauty you got with you. Who exactly is she? Pretty sure you had a thing against redheads in the past.”

“Oh, uh…”

That’s right. I’d better explain all this too.

“I don’t have anything against them or hate them or whatever. I just had a tiny bit of trauma. That’s all.”

Soldat shook his head. “That’s just a fancy term for hatin’ somethin’.”

Really? As I contemplated this questionable wisdom, I glanced at Eris. She had her arms folded over her chest, her legs spread beneath her in her usual stance. It was almost imperceptible, but I could tell by the look on her face she was unnerved. She must have known I didn’t have anything against redheads. I made it plain every single day how much I—no. It was better not to assume and state it outright.

“I don’t hate red hair,” I told her.

“I know that!”

Soldat whistled. “Ooh, showin’ off in front of me, eh? So, this beauty here’s your woman?”

“Yes, her name is Eris,” I explained. “Eris, as I am sure you can already tell from his story, this is Mister Soldat, who looked after me when I was in a rough way.”

She kept her arms crossed as she glowered at him. “Eris,” she said, by way of greeting.

“Uh, yeah…and I’m Soldat, as ya know… Hold up a sec. Eris? Ain’t that the name of the woman who put you in that whole situation?” Soldat narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, uh, let me explain.” Just as I did with Sara not so long ago, I gave him a bite-sized version of everything that had

happened. It was much easier to talk to Soldat about all of this than Sara, to be honest.

“Hmmm. Well, long as you’re okay with it, I guess.” Strangely, Soldat’s reaction to it all was far less accepting than Sara’s had been. He pulled a face, glowering right back at Eris. “Quagmire here was in a really bad way back then, y’know? We’re talking an-inch-from-suicide bad. Knowing all that, you still had the audacity to get with him again, huh?”

Eris's hair almost seemed to stand on end, as if crackling with anger at him. I shot out of my seat and tried to make my way over to her so I could force her back. I even opened my mouth, hoping to pacify her with a few soothing words—tell her that Soldat didn't mean any harm by it, so there was no reason to be cross with him.

Before I could do anything, Eris whipped around and dashed out of the room.

"Whelp. Looks like I said too much, huh?" Soldat slapped a hand over his forehead, pushing his hair back. He glanced at me. "You didn't tell her about any of that?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you didn't tell her how bad off you were back then?"

"I thought I had," I said, not feeling too confident now.

Thinking it over, we hadn't had the chance to talk to anyone who'd known me at the time. Soldat was the only one who knew the extent of how bad it'd gotten. Sylphie had surely filled Eris in on the gist of it. I had told her a bit myself as well. But this was her first time hearing the full, unabridged story from someone who had actually been with me at the time.

From Eris's perspective, this likely served as a reminder of what an awful mistake she'd made. It didn't really bother *me* anymore. I thought of it as a short patch of misery that'd been washed away by my current happiness. I was free as a bird nowadays, doing whatever I liked.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go comfort her," I said.

"Right. See ya then, Quagmire! And don'tcha forget that bit about offering me work even if I lose an arm!"

"I won't," I promised with a nod. "Just don't lose your life along with it."

"The hell I ever would. Don'tcha know who you're talkin' to?"

I hoped we'd keep the same rapport whenever we saw each other again. With that wish in mind, I headed for the door. It was right as I rested my hand on the handle that Soldat called out again.

"Hey, that's right. I don't know where that Kalman fella went off to, but there's a place I went a couple of years ago on mercenary work you oughta know about."

The information he passed on had nothing to do with my search for Geese or my designs on taking down the Man-God. However, it was extremely pertinent to Eris and me.

***

Meeting my old friends Soldat and Sara had been pure coincidence. Come to think of it, it'd been ten whole years since Eris left me behind in the Fittoa Region. There was no way of knowing where life would take me back then. I'd been too self-involved to even contemplate it. Even if I had, I could never have predicted returning here with Eris in search of the North God. I had a home, wives, and children to go back to—I wouldn't have foreseen that in my wildest dreams.

It wasn't like my life was pure perfection. I had an enemy in the Man-God. It turned out that Geese was against me too. Geese had been my friend, a subordinate—during my time in prison, anyway—and a savior.

And right now, Eris was distraught. When I found her, she was on the edge of the town on the gentle slope of a hill, having thrown herself onto the ground. Her eyes were fixed on the sky above. I wondered what was going through her head and remembered our time in Roa. She would often plop herself down on a stack of hay behind the stables and stare up at the sky like this whenever things didn't go the way she wanted.

I slunk up beside her and took a seat. As soon as I did, she reached over and grabbed my hand.

“I did something awful to you,” she said.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I never knew you tried to kill yourself before.”

“Well…I was just really hammered and not in my right mind.”

Her eyes darted over to me. “Does Sylphie know?”

I shrugged. “I doubt it.”

The whole suicide thing was spur of the moment, and Soldat immediately put a stop to it. I never thought about it again afterward. I didn’t really think it was worth bringing up.

The more important question right now was how to comfort Eris. I didn’t get the feeling she would be satisfied if I simply said what happened between us back then didn’t bother me anymore. It was a little light for the heaviness of the topic.

“What?” Eris demanded sullenly.

“Nothing, I guess. I was just thinking I’d never have met Soldat or Sara if things hadn’t gone down the way they did between us when we were in the Fittoa Region.”

“Yeah, well. Sorry.”

“It’s not like I was fishing for an apology,” I told her. “Sara and Mister Soldat were fine people, weren’t they? What I’m trying to say is that since I met people like them, it really wasn’t all bad.”

Eris squeezed my hand tightly.

She’d changed so much. Eris wouldn’t have been so transparent in the past, letting me see her weakness like this. Granted, I *was* the main reason she felt so vulnerable at the moment.

“As you know, Eris, I’m doing great now. We’ve had a kid. What’s in the past is in the past.” I massaged her hand, hoping it

would reassure her.

“I guess.” She suddenly yanked me toward her. The next I knew, Eris had pulled herself up and grabbed me by the shoulder, planting her lips firmly against mine.

Oh, my goodness, what is this? I realize I’m all yours, but…my good sir, we’re out in the open, and the sun is still high in the sky. Yet you would kiss me without warning? At this rate, I’d go from Rudeus the Abstinent to Rudeus the Amorous.

“I’ll never disappear without saying anything. Ever again,” Eris swore.

“Right.”

“Sylphie was mad at me, too.”

“True.”

I’ll stay at your side forevermore, my handsome prince! No, wait. This was no time to be a lovestruck maiden.

“I’ll be more careful in the future, too,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Now then, how about we get going? We came up empty this time around, but next time we’ll find North God Kalman for sure.” I paused, suddenly realizing something. There were a number of men watching us from afar. They appeared to be mercenaries judging by their rugged faces, and their stares were directed entirely at Eris. I didn’t sense any enmity from them. Nor did I sense they were here to challenge her, having worked out she was a Sword King. *Maybe they’re here to ask her for training, like what happened at the Sword Sanctum?*

“Do you need something?” I asked, a bit worried they might be here to chastise us for such open displays of affection in a public place.

“Oh, uh, i-it’s not like we’re here to pick a fight or nothing.”

I didn’t intend that, either. No need for all the stammering, guys. Then again, perhaps I’d startled them by calling them out for their ogling.

“There’s a legend passed down about the divine spirit we Markiens worship…”

I tilted my head. “Yeah? Mind filling me in on which divinity you’re referring to?”

“The Goddess of the Forest, Laine. A divine spirit of war with the body of a beast.”

Laine? That name sounded familiar. The description of a woman with a beast-like body made me wonder if this wasn’t a beastfolk religion. It didn’t make a lot of sense why Markien would have developed a faith in a beastfolk god, but still.

Wait, speaking of beastfolk… Laine sounds an awful lot like Ghislaine. Ghislaine was admittedly about as far from the word *goddess* as humanly possible, but there was a custom in this world of people naming their children after gods or esteemed figures. That could have been the inspiration for Ghislaine’s name. For all I knew, slapping the names of ancient sacred beasts from several generations ago on their kids was a regular beastfolk custom.

“It is said the Forest Goddess Laine was in search of a girl with fire-red hair. That if you informed her of this girl’s location, she would bestow upon you a blessing of victory and good fortune.”

“That’s what’s up?”

Now it made sense why so many people were stealing glances at Eris in town. Wouldn’t surprise me if there were more legends about redheaded women—like, never having to go hungry again or going to Valhalla after death, things like that.

“That’s the only reason we were looking,” said the man on behalf of their group. “But sorry for staring.”

“Oh, no. It’s all right.”

The men promptly left after that.

“Well, we may have come up empty this time around, but there is somewhere I’d like to go before we head back home. Do you mind?”

“No, that’s fine.”

I nodded. “Then that settles it. Let’s get going.” I took her hand and lifted myself to my feet, and the two of us made our way out of the town.

It took some time to find the exact location I was searching for. All I had to go on was what Soldat described to me, and it wasn’t as if he even knew the precise spot. The name of the country had changed, as had its borders. I planned to continue searching for several days at most, but by pure good fortune we ran across it. Or perhaps Ghislaine had, at some point, described the area to me and that memory still lingered. Most importantly, it wound up being a lot closer than I’d thought.

Our destination was halfway up a hillock at the base of a tree. Rotted wooden planks were fashioned into makeshift markers and stabbed into the ground. One was broken. I guessed someone had ripped off a piece to use as firewood, or perhaps it’d crumbled under the elements due to shoddy craftsmanship.

These markers, fashioned by clumsy but determined hands, were meant to indicate two graves. The broken marker had only half a name—“Ida”. The unbroken one read: Philip Boreas Greyrat. It was probably safe to assume the broken one had once read: Hilda Boreas Greyrat. The letters themselves were poorly formed, the lines created by unsteady hands. Barely legible. Still, I knew the writer of these names. She would have been in deep denial at the time, knowing her—refusing to accept that the two of them were gone. It had to have been so difficult. I could appreciate now how heartrending and sorrowful it must have been. This must have been part of why she was so grateful she’d learned how to write.

“Mother and Father died here, huh,” Eris said after a long pause.

“Yeah. Seems that way.”

The disaster all those years ago had teleported Philip and Hilda here. For the residents of the Conflict Zone, it was suspect to find two Asuran nobles here, of all places. Why had they come? And to what end? They hadn’t even been allowed to give their answers before their captors concluded they were spies.

Philip had been a suave speaker, I remembered. Calculating, intelligent. No one could contest that he was a savvy political player. I figured he must have tried to negotiate with his captors. Given the suddenness of their teleportation, however, he was bound to have been in a state of shock. Unable to explain how or why he had been transported here, he had no way of verifying his identity—nor would he have known the political environment of his new surroundings, who was in charge, or even the name of the country.

Who could have survived a situation like that? With his beloved wife at his back, in need of his protection, but utterly without allies?

Eris and I might have met the same fate, if not for Ruijerd’s timely rescue and the Man-God’s advice to trust in him. There were other cases like his as well; Lilia and Aisha had found themselves in a precarious situation. For many people, the moment they were displaced, their lives were forfeit.

The Displacement Incident was an almost incalculable calamity. I hadn’t considered the gravity of it at the time, assuming such things were fairly normal here in this world, but nothing of a similar scope had happened since. It impressed upon me what an unprecedented disaster we’d lived through.

“Father must’ve hated how things turned out,” said Eris.

“I’m sure he did.”

“If he were still alive and could see us now, I wonder what he’d think about it.” She kept her gaze glued to the grave as she spoke. I stood behind her, looking at her back.

“I figure he’d be delighted.”

Philip had been an ambitious man. He wanted a union between Eris and me so that he could use it to rise to the top of the Boreas family. If the Displacement Incident had never taken place, he'd have surely pushed me into doing exactly that. No matter how much I protested about my promise to Sylphie to attend the University of Magic together, he would have concocted some way to win me over and arranged for Sylphie to be my second wife instead. Could he really have assumed political power that way? We'd never know.

"I guess so…" Eris mumbled.

In a way, things had more or less ended up the way Philip hoped. The reigning Asuran king was indebted to me, my words had gained influence, and I had connections among the Asuran nobility. I hardly held much responsibility, but that didn't matter. If Philip were alive—if he'd merely been transported to another world like me, only to return now, ten years after the fact—then he'd try to use my current position to cozy up to Ariel. Knowing his personality as I did, I could imagine him taking up a position as her advisor and manipulating things behind the scenes.

"Mother must be pleased too, right?"

I nodded. "Definitely."

Hilda had long lamented her sons being taken by the Boreas main house, enough that she had initially taken out her frustrations on me. I'd had no part in any of it, needless to say. She had opened her heart up to me by the end, but it wasn't long afterward, before we could really have much of a conversation, that the Displacement Incident occurred. I never saw her again after that. Never would.

Regardless, Eris and I had gotten married and had a child together—a son we named Arus. He was Hilda's grandchild. Gosh, she would have doted on him. I could imagine her fussing over him constantly to make up for the sons she bore but hadn't been allowed to raise.

Hilda was a noblewoman at heart, though, so she likely would have discriminated against Sylphie and Roxy's children. That would have caused some quarrels… But no, perhaps *because* she was Asuran nobility, she would have been more understanding than most about my polygamous marriage. Then again, maybe she would have told Eris, "You may be the third wife right now, but you need only poison the other two to nab yourself the position of first wife!"

No, be sensible. She wouldn't have said something like that. Perhaps I was a bit biased based on the intimidating encounters I'd had with her.

I was sure she would be pleased by our marriage. That was what counted.

For a while, silence fell between us. I suspected Eris was also lost in memories of her life in Roa.

Eris had been moving nonstop since all of this started. It was a long trip from the Demon Continent back to the Fittoa Region. From there, she went immediately to the Sword Sanctum and dedicated herself to training. The two of us reunited, had a child together, and while trying to raise Arus, she had been following me here, there, and everywhere as my own personal bodyguard. Had she had any time to breathe and lose herself to a few moments of nostalgia?

"Hey," Eris snapped. "What are you doing?"

I'd begun pawing at the grave dirt, prompting her panicked question. "I was thinking about moving them," I explained. "This place just seems a little lonely for them."

"Oh…you're right. I'll help."

It would have been a simple matter to use my earth magic to peel back the earth and get to their remains, but I elected to do it by hand with Eris. We carved through the hard earth until we found their bones. I carefully washed them before wrapping them up in some cloth I'd brought with me.

"All right," I said. "Let's get going."

“Fine.” Eris pulled herself to her feet.

Asura Kingdom would be a better place for their graves, right? It would be easier for us to visit them if we placed them in Sharia, but I thought it more appropriate to take them home—to the place to which they were most accustomed. The Fittoa Region was still in the midst of development. Not even a glimmer of its former glory had returned. I thought the capital, Ars, to be more appropriate. *Yeah. The graveyard used by the Boreas house would probably be best.*

“Rudeus,” Eris said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Hm?”

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, touched by her sincere expression of gratitude.

After that, Eris and I stopped by Asura Kingdom where we reburied Philip and Hilda. I consulted Luke on where would be best to lay them to rest, and he guided us to an appropriate location. As I mentioned above, there was a graveyard where many other Boreas members were buried, but the circumstances forced us to put them to rest at a graveyard nearby. This one was a bit more isolated, created by the previous king about ten years ago in secret. Luke had only learned of it very recently himself.

A marker in this graveyard read: *Here rests the ferocious lion.*

No one made any allusions as to who this phrase could be referring to. The grave keepers must have been sworn to secrecy, because no amount of asking them yielded any answers. I could guess the identity of the person, in part because it would explain why Luke decided to lead us here.

That was where we put Philip and Hilda to rest. Eris and I put our hands together respectfully in front of their new graves and swore we would visit them again.

***

Our visit to the Sword Sanctum and our search in the Conflict Zone for North God Kalman the Third had ended in failure. That was twice I had come up short, not to mention we'd taken a considerable detour on the way back. I half-expected to be admonished for it. I could picture it like one of those variety shows—Orsted pulling a string and the floor giving way under me, sending me plummeting below.

Well, no matter what, I couldn't be blamed for how things turned out. Neither of us expected the Sword God to suddenly vanish, and we'd already taken into consideration the possibility we wouldn't be able to locate the North God.

I felt a mounting sense of powerlessness, having missed out on meeting two people who might have provided considerable firepower for our side. But the further we got from the loops Orsted knew, the more we'd encounter the unexpected.

I planned to be genuine with Orsted about going out of my way to visit Philip and Hilda's graves. That had taken considerably more time than my search for North God Kalman, despite the latter being the original purpose of our trip.

"I have returned, Sir Orsted," I announced. "Unfortunately, the Sword God and the North God were…"

"Hmph." He lifted his head, expression so intimidating it cut me off. I could see the anger on his face.

I knew it. He's pissed at me for taking that detour. Wait, no. Not angry. That was just how his face looked.

Even if he wasn't angry, I was curious about what he'd been studying before I walked in. He had a number of stone tablets lined up in front of him. They almost looked like grave markers, but I recalled they were the communication devices we'd set up earlier. Placards beneath each one indicated where they were connected to. It wasn't so bad when we only had Asura Kingdom, Millis, and the King Dragon realm, but with us having teleported all across the

Demon Continent, their numbers had increased. It looked more like a server room than the CEO's office.

"Look at this," Orsted said curtly. His eyes landed on one of the tablets which was glowing faintly. This was one linked to Atofe's fortress. The message inscribed upon it was short and simple: *We have captured Kishirika Kishirisu.*

Chapter 10:
The Second Eye

THE NECROSS FORTRESS in the Demon Continent's Gaslow Territory was known for being the most impregnable of all. Deep within its bowels, in the scarcely used dungeons, resided a prisoner.

"Grrrrr!"

The prisoner's hands were bound by shackles, a metal ball attached to her feet. She'd even been given blue and white striped pajamas to wear. She looked pitiful.

"Grrrrr!"

The low growl that echoed hollowly against the walls was not, in fact, the girl's voice. It was her empty stomach. It snarled to express all her displeasure, agreeing with the frustration she felt at her present circumstances. Then again, maybe it was just empty.

"Come out!"

The door to her cell suddenly swung open to reveal two towering figures, hidden in armor black as midnight. They forced her to her feet and dragged her out. She had no choice but to go with them. An angry, unpleasant sound reverberated down the hallway as she dragged the heavy metal ball behind her. The prisoner didn't strain under the weight, however. She was stronger than she looked.

Led by the black knights, she made her way outside of the dungeons. Their path took them through a long corridor and up a flight of stairs. At last, their trip ended at the fortress's throne room.

"Hurry up. Move it!"

Their hands shoved into her back, lurching her forward. She stumbled into the circular space, lit by purple candelabras. It was the kind of place you might expect a criminal's punishment to be carried out. When she managed to lift her head, she spotted the throne

ahead of her. It was a place the prisoner had once occupied in the past, but now, it was a demon king who sat upon it.

“Atofe…” murmured the prisoner.

The demon king was clad in the same midnight-black armor as her underlings. The moment the prisoner laid her eyes upon Atofe, her cheeks flushed red with anger.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” The prisoner roared with all the power she could muster, her voice erupting all the way from the base of her very, very empty tummy. Perhaps that was what gave it its power.

In contrast, the demon king before her—the most feared in the whole Demon Continent—merely adjusted her posture and scowled at her captive.

“How wretched,” said the prisoner. “The departed Necross would lament to see you like this!”

“Father told me to live how I want!” Atofe shouted back.

“Only because you’re a moron who will not listen to other people! He must have known it was the only way you *could* live. He gave up on you!”

“I am no moron!”

Demon King Atofe was absolutely furious, but the prisoner didn’t shrink. Instead, she snorted with derisive laughter.

“Doubtless, you *are* a moron. A moron among morons. Even you must understand that. All someone has to do is dangle something promising in front of you, and you haven’t got the brains to think twice about it.”

Atofe shook her head vigorously. “That’s not true! Kal said I was smart! That I’m quick to learn things!”

“Atofe, that was…” The prisoner gave a meaningful pause, as if to draw out the moment. The next words she had to say would cut

deep—and she knew these ones in particular were ones she must never utter to Atofe. "…merely flattery."

"Graaaaaah!"

The demon king's rage boiled over. The surrounding black knights flew to her, trying to pin her back, but she knocked them away easily. Still, the black knights were not to be deterred. They took up a formation similar to a rugby scrummage and pinned their master back.

The demon king flailed her fists through the air, screeching. "You rotten little weakling! I'll kill you! I'll tear you limb from limb! You'll bite it again before I'm through!"

"Yeah, yeah. If it bothers you that much, learn to count."

"Graaaaaah!"

The prisoner's taunting provoked the demon king into gathering her power to force back her knights.

"Lady Kishirika, please cease this antagonizing! If you continue provoking Lady Atofe, she—"

"Shut your mouths!" Kishirika snapped back at them. "I only came along with you because you promised me delicious treats, and look how you have treated me! I won't be satisfied until I have fully voiced my complaints!"

Yes, the prisoner Kishirika had actually been lured into a trap. One of their number had stripped off his trademark black armor and tempted her by saying, "Little girl, we'll give you some sweets if you'll just come with us." That was how she'd found herself here.

It was true; *Kishirika* was the one who had fallen for the promise of something promising without giving it much thought. She'd fallen for the prospect of food hook, line, and sinker—it was only afterward that she realized she'd been deceived. Worse, the men hadn't even made good on their promise. She'd gotten no treats at all!

“You guys haven’t even told me what you took me captive for! What are you claiming I did wrong? I haven’t…” Kishirika hesitated a moment. “I haven’t done anything wrong, have I?” She started fidgeting, rubbing her hands together. There were too many possibilities to rule out. Kishirika dabbled in all sorts of evil—too much, one might argue. Even she was self-aware enough to know that wrongdoing was most of what she did with her time. It wouldn’t be too surprising if someone was angry with her for it.

To her surprise, the demon king declared, “Hmph! You haven’t done anything wrong!”

It had taken mere seconds for her fury to subside. Atofe knew how futile it was to be angry with this particular captive.

“Then tell me *why*!” demanded Kishirika. “No matter how unreasonable you are, you are not so evil you would capture me for no reason whatsoever! The only time you do something like this is when you have the wrong idea about something, or someone has deceived you into…” Her voice trailed off as realization dawned on her. “So that’s it. Someone’s tricked you again!”

“No! No one has deceived me!” Atofe shouted back, denying Kishirika’s charge.

“That’s what deceived people say! All right then! If that’s what brought all of this about, tell me everything. There’s still time. I can save you before it’s too late and you do something irrevocable. So why don’t you remove these shackles first?” Kishirika thrust her hands out in front of her, holding them up.

Atofe wasn’t looking at her. She stared off into the distance, lost in thought. “Deception is committed through conversation. That wasn’t the case for us. We fought. We fought one another, and at the end, I admitted defeat.”

“You liar! You mean to tell me someone as ridiculously competitive as you admitted defeat?!”

“The one who forced me to admit my defeat…is this man here!” Atofe pointed her finger in the direction of a mage swathed in

gray robes. He had a terrible expression on his face. The kind of smarmy, perverted type one might expect to find from a man who kept three wives waiting on him hand and foot. Or perhaps it was simply that he was trying too hard to smile.

"It's… It's you…" Kishirika stammered. "Rubeus!"

"Close, but not quite."

"I-I guess it might be possible, with that ridiculous amount of mana you have, to be able to…" Kishirika shuddered in fear. She had met this human mage just twice in the past. The first time she had laughed at how eerie the amount of mana he held was. The second time, she had laughed at his magical prowess in being able to fend off Demon King Atofe.

She wasn't laughing this time. A man who could command Atofe and convince the demon king to capture Kishirika wasn't funny. Not in the least.

"Hehe." The mage chuckled nevertheless as he looked down at her, his lips resting in an unsettling smile. "To tell the truth, there is something I want to give you."

"Wh-wh-what could that be?" Kishirika demanded, her voice trembling uncontrollably. "Some kind of last rites?"

"Hahaha, something much better than that." He chuckled heartily and his grin stretched even wider.

"I-I-I won't be misled! You menfolk are always like this! Don't try to trick me with your sweet talk!" Although Kishirika tried to resist him, she had nowhere to run. The tremor in her voice betrayed her strong front as well. She began scanning the area, looking for some method of escape while she crossed her legs, trying to hold her bladder despite the fear.

"I wonder if you'll still be able to say that after you see this?" The mage lowered the backpack he'd been carrying. His hand disappeared inside, soon producing a black box.

“Eek!” Kishirika shrieked. A black box?! Her terror swelled just imagining what could possibly be contained inside. What could it be? It was no ordinary black box—it was a black-black box. Black as midnight. She knew there had to be something terrifying in there! Why else would it be such a potent shade of black?!

“Once you have this, you will *want* to do anything I tell you.”

“Wh-what?!”

He opened the box. Contained snugly inside was a ring-shaped object as big as a fist. It was golden with a strange creamy white coating on it. It almost resembled mold, she thought. All of the hair on her body stood on end. For as creepy as its shape and color was, it emitted a sweet, saccharine smell.

“Wh-what is that thing? What…do you mean to do with it?”

“Haha, this is what you do with it.” The mage took it in his hand and approached her, bringing the object to her mouth. At the same time, two black knights flanking her clapped their hands down on her shoulders. There was no escape.

“Say ‘aaah.’”

“N-no… Stop… Stooooop!”

Rudeus

THE DEMON WORLD’S Great Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu nibbled on the doughnut I’d brought her while tears poured down her cheeks. “Does something so delicious really exist? I cannot believe it…!”

Aisha had done me the favor of creating this, aided by the fresh eggs and sugar we’d secured from the Holy Country of Millis. Apparently, Nanahoshi had told her about it; through Aisha’s own diligent study, she had managed to recreate it. It was a simple matter to gather the necessary ingredients, since our house cooked up a lot of fried foods anyway.

“I struggle to fathom this… Perhaps the entire reason I was born was to savor the flavor of this delicious creation!”

It had been a long time since I last saw Kishirika, and at first she had been in a wretched mood. Now she seemed perfectly fine. Ah, the magic of doughnuts! I had actually asked Roxy to sample it as well before bringing one here, and it had been incredibly effective. *I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look that happy before.* Sadly, that meant I’d lost to a doughnut.

No, no, I assured myself, *I'm the one who established the route for these goods to come here from Millis.* In that sense, I was the one who had created that smile. *Father-in-law, Mother-in-law, I am making your daughter happy, just as I promised.* I mean, they were also Aisha's doughnuts, but still. Roxy's reaction proved that doughnuts were super effective against demons.

"Ah…"

However, just as mana is finite, so too was the magic—or rather, the number of doughnuts. Upon eating twelve of them, Kishirika regarded me with great sorrow.

"Is this really all you have…?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence.

"If you give me more, I will grant you whatever you desire. How is that?"

"Those are precisely the words I wanted to hear." I flashed a smile at her.

Kishirika's eyes widened in shock. She wrapped her arms around her body protectively. "Khh… So it's my body you want after all. No matter how delicious the food you offer, this body belongs to Badi. But after treating me to something so sumptuous, I… Khh!"

"I'm currently upholding a vow of abstinence, so no need for that," I told her.

"Really? Abstaining too much is bad for the body, you know."

"Well, if I find myself unable to resist any longer, I will ask one of my wives instead."

"Wives? Oh, that's right. You're already married. My, but you children of men do mature quickly…"

Regardless, I hadn't come all this way for chitchat. There was something I needed to ask her. Rumor had it that Kishirika would

give a reward to those who brought her food, which was why I'd procured these doughnuts from Aisha.

"First, Lady Kishirika, I would entreat you to use your power to inform me where Geese is."

"Oh? Geese, you say?"

I nodded. "Yes. His most defining features are…" I went on to describe the finer characteristics of the man, including what I believed to be his true name. It was the one he had signed his letter to me with, anyway.

"Hm, yes, yes. I do feel like I have heard of this person before… Wait one moment."

She used her eye, while cream still liberally stained her lips. Her eye spun in place, almost like a slot machine, until it changed to the one she intended to use, stopping suddenly. This particular eye was known as an Eye of All-Seeing. With it, she glared into the distance, scrunching her face.

"Oh? Hm… This is… Ah, yes, that looks delicious." She muttered to herself as she continued her scan of the far-off distance until at last, she froze. "Found him."

That hadn't taken long.

"He's at the eastern end of the Northern Territories, in Biheiril Kingdom. There, in the depths of a forest, he seems to be speaking with someone. My, but the man does have the face of a villain," Kishirika remarked before snickering. She leaned a bit further in the direction she found him, compelled by curiosity. "Now, let's see…who is he speaking with… Hm?" Her expression instantly clouded over. "I can't see him anymore."

Kishirika's expression suddenly turned deadly serious as she closed her eyes. She leaned her head back, letting her eyes rest for a few moments. It was only several seconds later that she finally opened them again.

“This sensation…yes, I know it. Your current enemy is the Man-God…correct?”

Gone was the jovial and mischievous atmosphere she usually had, replaced by something more solemn and reserved. Still, I answered her question honestly.

“Yes.”

“And if you’re fighting the Man-God, that must mean you have aligned yourself with the Dragon God?”

I hesitated for a moment before saying, “Yes.”

“Hmm…” Kishirika folded her arms and lowered her head, taking a pensive pose. After several seconds, she glanced back up at the sky, like a thoughtful soul might gaze right at the moon. Granted, it was daytime outside and sunny to boot, with nothing but a few clouds streaking through the otherwise empty blue. “And Atofe, you have aligned yourself with this boy?”

“Yeah.”

“So that’s it. This must be destiny, I suppose.”

Kishirika wasn’t being her typical silly, joking self. In fact, she seemed more like a sage. What in the world was going on with her? Had someone slipped something suspicious into those doughnuts?

“Lady Kishirika, do you mean to say you know the Man-God?” I asked.

“Yup. The two of us have a bit of a history. Frankly speaking, I would like to avoid ever getting involved with him again.”

I tilted my head. “A history, you say?”

“Nothing that remarkable. Just that a mere 4,200 years ago, he manipulated me and Badigadi. He was after Laplace’s life.”

Four thousand and two hundred years ago…? She was referring to the time of the Second Great Human-Demon War, right?

“If I recall correctly, that was when the Fighting God battled against the Dragon God,” I said.

“Sure is. Badi donned the Fighting God Armor to protect me and faced off with the Demonic Dragon King Laplace.”

I gawked at her. “Wait…Badi as in His Majesty, Badigadi?”

My shock was immeasurable.

Did this mean Badigadi was actually the Fighting God all along? Orsted had never told me anything about that, though I felt as though I had heard something similar somewhere before… *Ah, Randolph, I think.* So what he said was true? At the time, I couldn’t determine whether he was talking about the same guy or not.

“It’s been a long time since he lost the Fighting God Armor… But if Badi shows up, best be careful. He still feels indebted to that rotten Man-God after all this time. He may end up being your enemy.”

After a long pause, I nodded. “All right.”

Badigadi was such a cheerful, bright man. I didn’t want to fight him if I could help it. Still, I had to make a mental note that he might end up on the other side. If at all possible, I hoped he would forget whatever debt he felt and join our side instead.

“Well, since you have Atofe on your side, I doubt Badi will be a match for you in his current state. I’d ask you to spare his life if you can help it, though,” said Kishirika.

Badigadi was Atofe’s younger brother and Kishirika’s fiancé. Family, in other words. Demons were rather quick to let go of grudges from my experience, but not so magnanimous that they would stand quietly by as their family was murdered.

“Very well,” I agreed. “Although, he’s not one to be easily killed in the first place anyway.”

“No, he’s not. The immortal demons’ strong point is their tenacity.” As she spoke, Kishirika snuck a glance at Atofe. The latter was posed proudly, but I had a feeling Kishirika wasn’t exactly complimenting her. “And also…come just a little closer.” She beckoned me with her hand.

I obeyed and leaned in. She cupped a hand to her mouth, presumably to whisper to me. “Bring your face a tiiiny bit closer.”

“What is it?”

“There, take this!” She suddenly thrust her fingers into my left eye. Indescribable pain shot through the entire socket.

“Gaaaaaah!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, trying instinctively to pull away. She grabbed me by the hair, pinning me so I couldn’t run away. I was using my Magic Armor—the Version Two—so where could I run?! This freaking hurt!

Oh, wait, I know what this is. Maybe it’s fine not to run.

“Oh? Decided to behave yourself, have you?”

I willingly let her do her work. It was painful, to be sure—a throbbing, splitting pain assaulted my entire brain. This had come without warning, and she was digging around in my eye socket, but at least I knew what she was doing. I had been through this before with my first eye.

“There, finished,” she declared, finally yanking her fingers out.

The intense, overwhelming pain remained, and I could see nothing out of the eye she had fiddled with. This was no reason to panic, however. I knew from past experience that it wasn’t permanent.

“It’s my personal policy to reward a person with an eye whenever they treat me to something delicious,” Kishirika explained.

I said nothing in response.

“This will be your second eye.”

I pressed a hand over my left eye as the pain slowly receded and knelt in front of Kishirika.

“I’m not the least bit concerned with this battle of yours, but I do have a bit of a bone to pick with the Man-God after what he did. That’s why I’m giving this to you as a parting gift.”

I lowered my hand from my eye. My vision doubled. It was a jarring sight, as if I was holding the palm of my hand over one of my eyes, giving me two different things to look at once. Boy, this was gonna cause some headaches.

“It’s an Eye of Distant Sight,” Kishirika informed me. “All it allows you to do is see in the distance, but it should prove useful.”

An Eye of Distant Sight, huh? I gave it a spin by closing my right eye and focusing mana into my left. It worked the same way as my right; by adjusting the amount of mana I used with it, I could gaze into the faraway distance.

I glanced down, and my vision passed through the fortress all the way to the entrance, where one of the black knights had removed his helmet to scratch the top of his head. I moved my head and focused mana into the eye again. My vision flashed, soaring through the sky, staring far off into the distance. It was almost like a camera with a zoom function.

Next, I saw a crater with a town nestled in the middle of it. However, I couldn’t make out the entirety of the town. When I tried to gaze even further into the distance, focusing more mana into my eye, I found my vision could go no further than some mountains. I could make out the detailed patterns on the rocks of the mountain and a Great Tortoise which threw its head up in a yawn, but no further. If there was something obstructing my view, my vision would stop there.

I cut off the flow of mana to my eye, and immediately it reverted back to my ordinary vision. This new demon eye merely allowed me to see far away. It wasn’t incredibly powerful, nor did it seem particularly easy to use. Still, I was already thinking of scenarios where it might be useful.

“The way you are now, two demon eyes should be no difficulty for you to handle.”

I told her sincerely and gratefully, “Thank you.”

“Yes, yes. Well then, Rudeus! Feel free to rely upon me again should you need me! Provided it doesn’t involve the Man-God, I will be happy to help!” Kishirika nimbly released the shackles from her hands then brought the side of her hand down in a chopping motion, removing the ball and chain trailing from her legs. Finally, she yanked off the striped pajamas she’d been forced to wear, revealing her usual bondage-style outfit.

“Farewell, then! Off I—bwah?!” Kishirika had leapt into the air, intending to make her escape, but she face-planted on the ground thanks to the firm grip Atofe had on her ankle.

“Wait,” said Atofe.

“What do you want? You have some nerve, interrupting my smooth exit.” Blood trickled down from Kishirika’s nose. She fixed Atofe with a glare.

Atofe stared down at her, not the least bit bothered. “Do me a favor, too.”

“What’s this? You took me captive for no reason and threw me into prison. I won’t be doing any favors for you. Unhand me. Shoo, shoo!” She slapped Atofe’s hand away, using her other to wipe away the crimson trail trickling from her nose.

Atofe wasn’t one to be so easily rebuffed. She grabbed Kishirika by the collar. Atofe’s grip pulled the tight leather halter top tighter, lifting ever so slightly to reveal her flat breasts beneath.

Ooh! I shook my head. *No, I’m Rudeus the Abstinent. I must resist such temptation! Khh!*

“Tell me where Al and Alex are. Rudeus needs strong fighters on his side, right? Those two would be perfect for this.”

“What?” Kishirika frowned. “I gave Rudeus his reward just a moment ago and told him someone’s location. I even gave him a Demon Eye as a special extra thanks. I can give no more.”

Al and Alex? I was pretty sure those were nicknames for the two surviving North Gods. Those close to them tended to call them

by those nicknames. I didn't remember bringing it up to Atofe that I had been looking for those two, but they *were* her family. Perhaps she hadn't needed any prompting to bring them up.

"Tell me," Atofe demanded.

"I told you already, no!"

Kishirika seemed disinclined to fulfill Atofe's request. It was good that I had learned Geese's current location, but I still knew nothing about what he was scheming. I needed to increase my number of allies if at all possible. We needed all the help we could get.

If at all possible, huh? An idea suddenly came to mind. *That's right. I have this!* I suddenly remembered the sinister, skull-shaped ring on my finger—Randolph's ring.

"Lady Kishirika? My lady, please, take a look at this," I bid her.

"Hm? What's this? I feel as though I have seen this somewhere before…and it gives me an ill premonition."

"Consider it Randolph's request."

"Mm… Randolph, eh? I remember now. That was his ring!" Her expression was almost theatrical; all the color had drained from her face. "Now I see, yes. His request, is it? He did certainly look after me. I always wondered why, each time he did so, he'd say, 'You can repay me for this later. At some point in the future, all right? Kehehe!' All with that unsettling laugh. Each time I glimpsed that smile, I'd tremble with fear, wondering what vile thing he would ask of me."

"Do as we ask, and you can consider all of your debts to him repaid."

Her face lit up. "All of it, you say? Welp, guess I have no choice! Yes, wait just a moment!" Again, she turned her eye to the empty air. It took only a few seconds of searching before she found what she was looking for.

She makes for one handy search engine, I thought.

“I don’t know about Al. He seems to be somewhere in Asura, I think, but the mana there is thick. Or he’s using something to ward off my ability to see him. Either way, it’s all blurry. Alex is walking down a highway. Looks like he’s headed in the direction of Biheiril Kingdom.”

“Is he now? Perfect. Rudeus, when you go to Biheiril Kingdom, seek out a man named Alexander. He should be able to lend you his strength,” said Atofe.

“All right.”

North God Kalman the Third was headed to Biheiril Kingdom? The same place Geese was? I had to wonder if that could be a coincidence. *No, knowing the Man-God, he’d realize Kishirika would track Geese down, right?* Then it was bound to be a trap. It just had to be.

“Now then, that’s all, right? I’ll be going now. All my limbs are free, no one’s got their hands on me, right? Good then. I’m off! Fwahahaha! Fwahahahahaha! Fwahaha! Fwahaha!”

Atofe stood there with her arms folded over her chest. Kishirika disappeared behind her, leaving me to contemplate all the information she had given me. Her high-pitched laughter echoed over and over, growing fainter and fainter until it disappeared entirely.

I got the feeling she’d let herself be caught on purpose. She really was like a storm, rolling in and out unexpectedly. Whatever her motives were, this visit had been fruitful. I had a newly implanted Eye of Distant Sight and some very useful information.

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I parted ways with Atofe and headed back to Sharia. It had been a productive visit; I knew Geese’s location, and I knew that North God Kalman the Third, one of the Seven Great Powers, was

also headed to that location. Oddly, neither the Sword God nor North God Kalman the Second's precise locations were easy to ascertain.

I had a bad feeling about that.

The real question is, what now? If possible, I wanted to decrease my number of enemies while increasing my number of allies. If Geese were to sense my presence anywhere nearby, I suspected he would run for it. The only situation in which he wouldn't was if he had already gathered a substantial amount of strength on his side. In that case, it was wiser for *me* to do the running.

Hmm… Perhaps the most prudent thing would be to scout ahead. I could use that time to seal off his escape, spread out my own units, and find a way to corner him.

It was a shame Kishirika had disappeared so soon. With her, I could have gotten a more detailed report on the situation there. *Isn't there some way I can entice that convenient little search engine into staying in one place for a while?* If I made a doughnut factory and shipped its products directly to a hideout I prepared for her, that might work.

I made my way back home as I weighed my options.

"Oh, welcome back, mew."

"We were on our way back ourselves. What a coincidence."

Upon returning, I happened to find Linia and Pursena. It was rare to see the two of them here like this. The two were occupying my living room sofa, sitting proudly as if they owned the place.

No, they're not the ones looking all arrogant, I corrected myself. *That'd be Eris.* The two beastfolk were resting their heads on Eris's lap, letting her stroke their ears. They were completely submissive under her stroking. It was like a harem scene.

"Welcome home," Eris said. She continued to pet the two beastfolk, unbothered by my gaze.

"Boss," said Linia, "I've got a report for ya, mew."

“It’s good news,” Pursena added.

Neither of them tried to peel themselves away. In fact, their throats seemed to be vibrating, purring from all the attention. Eris had both of them wrapped around her finger.

“Here you go.” Pursena remained in the same position as she held out a single letter for me.

Not very professional behavior, but I’ll let it pass, I thought.

“A report from the east came in, mew. They said they found someone exactly like that figurine—green hair, a red jewel in the forehead. A Superd. That’s what was written in the support, anyhow, mew.”

“Oh! Really?!” I excitedly snatched the letter and reviewed the contents.

The report was incredibly precise. It recounted the discovery of a foreign merchant making a deal with a man. The man had a weapon: a white shaft with cloth covering the tip. He wore an armored headband over his forehead and was swathed in thick robes with a hood pulled over his head to conceal his eyes. It was only thanks to a sudden gust of wind that his green hair was spotted; it also exposed the human clothes hidden beneath his thick shroud. The man had moved secretively, trying to avoid people’s notice while he bought some medicine. Our informant failed to confirm what medicine he’d purchased, but the man’s appearance matched Ruijerd closely.

“What?” I gasped as I read the final line on the report.

Location of Discovery: Biheiril Kingdom, about half a day west of its second-biggest city, Irel, in a village close to the Earth Wyrm’s forest valley.

Biheirel Kingdom. It was the third time I had heard that same location in a single day. No matter how dense I was, even I realized what was going on here.

“Now I get it…”

Geese, North God Kalman the Third, and Ruijerd. There was no way all of that could be a coincidence. Something was most definitely about to happen in Biheiril Kingdom. No, that wasn't right. Geese was trying to *make* something happen.

It was possible this letter was *itself* one of Geese's traps. Did he intend to use Ruijerd as a shield against me? Had he already won Ruijerd to his side? I had no idea which one it was, but I would find out. If there was even a possibility that Ruijerd was in danger, then I would go. I had to go.

The time for preparation was over. It was time for the showdown.

Extra Chapter:
Geese and His Final Ally

FOUND MYSELF in the Biegoya Region of the Demon Continent inside a certain town mayor's estate. The scent of booze stunk up the air. The men in the room, all completely hammered, were half-naked. Not a stitch on the bastards from the waist up.

I was smack in front of this group's head honcho. I knew the guy by reputation, but he was a little outta my league. I knew his name, of course. I'd spied him from a ways off. It's not like we ever hung out, though; not like we so much as talked. I was just kinda aware of him, right? Knew that he was out there in the world, doing something. That was the extent of our little relationship—if you could call that a relationship.

I'd been insinuating myself into his group lately, but I hadn't got used to being around 'em. My knees were still knocking.

"Fwahaha! Fwahaha! Fwah! Fwah! Fwahahaha!"

The man was energetically necking his drink. His six arms clutched a whole barrel of the ale; he knocked it back and swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed. The way he guzzled suggested he wasn't paying attention to the taste. Waste of a nice drink, if you asked me.

"You're in a fine mood," I said, approaching the man.

Having drained the last drop from the cask, the man tossed it off into the distance. His eyes fixed on me. "Fwahahaha! Yeah, I am!" He offered only that brief response before peeling his gaze away. "Get me another drink, I've taken a liking to your ale! A real vintage. Fwahaha!"

This guy wasn't interested in me. I knew a word that'd grab his attention, though. As soon as he heard it, I knew he'd sit up and listen.

“So. Have you heard of the Man-God?” I asked.

His laughter stopped, and his eyes snapped to mine. “You,” he said. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Same place as you. In a dream.”

“Oh, really? Head over to Ranoa Kingdom’s University of Magic! You’ll find someone with a deep connection to the Man-God there! Fwahaha!”

I assumed he was referring to Boss. True, if I was connected to the Man-God and wanted a way out, that would be the right place for it. Reasonable bit of advice.

“Nope,” I said. “I’ve got business with you.”

“What?”

“I’m aligning myself with the Man-God. We’re fighting the Dragon God. Join us.”

“Oh?”

His whole posture changed. His jovial grin turned into something serious. It was a startling shift considering this was a perpetually cheerful, jolly sorta guy.

“If that’s what you want, let me tell you something. Consider it advice.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“If you align yourself with the Man-God, one day you will destroy what’s most precious to you with your own hands. Get out while you can.”

“Yep, I know. I followed His advice before and it led me to destroying my entire homeland.”

He stared at me blankly. “Your homeland? Hm? And you still follow that guy?”

“Guess I do, yeah.”

This must be what it's like to watch someone change their mind about you. I felt him regard me, suddenly, as an interesting figure. A curiosity. I think I liked it.

"You destroyed your homeland with your own hands and you felt nothing?"

I quickly shook my head. "Nah, course not. It was a real shock for me. How should I put it? It was only once it was too late, once things were already out of my control, that I realized all of a sudden—I didn't hate the place. I'd thought of my family and siblings as nothing but scum, I'll admit. But then I realized I never wanted 'em to die. I was all regret. 'What've I done?' I couldn't even bring myself to stand for days."

It'd been several years after I first started taking the Man-God's advice and set off traveling when it all went down. Happened before I met Paul and the others, when I was an adventurer desperate for money. The Man-God had advised me to offer information to a certain guy. It was different from His usual advice, phrased more like a request. I did feel like something was a little hinky about it. Still, I did exactly as He told me to, offered the information, and netted myself a handsome reward for my trouble.

It wasn't even that much money. Seemed like it at the time, but it was only enough to go a month without work before it'd dry up. Didn't matter to me—I was pleased as hell. I took my money, marched down to a pub, treated everyone there to drinks, and drowned myself in liquor.

The next day, it all went to shit. That day, I discovered the information I'd handed over had provoked a Demon King's wrath. This Demon King was a generally mild-mannered guy, but everyone has a secret they don't want to get out. Well, the info I'd passed on related directly to that secret. The Demon King traced the leak to a demon of the Nuka Tribe.

The Demon King went straight to our clan's settlement and massacred everybody. No mercy—none. Men and women, elderly

and children—indiscriminate slaughter. Not even the Demon King survived his own massacre. The intel I'd passed on was key to killing off this Demon King. The man who'd bought this intel from me sold it off, and the buyers killed the Demon King.

I was the only survivor.

It was a shock. I wept. I wailed. I lamented. *Why am I such an idiot? Why did I trust the Man-God?*

How d'ya think the Man-God reacted to all of this? He mocked me and He laughed.

"Pretty awful, right? He made me experience the worst possible thing imaginable, then He kicked me in the guts when I was down," I said, thinking back.

"And you trust the Man-God after all of that, hm? Fwahaha! You're an interesting man!"

"Right? I get that a lot."

I doubted there was another man alive who'd fallen to the depths of despair and still clung to the Man-God in spite of it. Rudeus hadn't done that. Neither had the guy I was speaking to now.

"I think you're pretty interestin' yourself," I said.

"Oh?"

Though I was skeptical from everything I'd heard until now, I started to suspect this guy wasn't like Rudeus. He seemed like my kinda guy, to be honest.

"It's not like I know all the details, but…you've got a girl you're interested in, right?"

"I do! We're engaged!"

"But you weren't able to spit out what you felt about her, is that right?" I continued, pressing him.

"Got me there."

“You only managed to tell her thanks to the Man-God, right? You owe him. Right?”

There was a pause.

“Hmm… Now that you mention it, I suppose I haven’t paid him back!”

“Why not pay back the debt you owe by lending us your strength now? Not a bad deal, right?”

Felt pretty risky considering he might crush me and my bones into a little ball with his bare hands. His interests were more on Rudeus’s side, after all. I bet he understood the pain that came from following the Man-God’s advice only to watch your most precious thing stomped into the dirt. At the same time, I bet he could comprehend how I felt, too. Yes, I’d been robbed of one thing that was precious to me, but I’d gotten off without losing the *most* precious thing of all.

This guy had to be like me. Although he’d been deceived like many others before, he was the only one who still remained, because in the end, he’d still gotten his hands on what he wanted most of all.

“Not a bad deal! I do have an obligation to lend my aid to the Man-God!”

I perked up. “Yeah, you do, don’t you?”

“But I refuse!”

“Huh? Why?!” I cried in disbelief.

“You!” He thrust his fingers at me—the index fingers of four of his hands. “Fwahaha! It would wound my reputation as a Demon King if I were to let myself be won over by word tricks and a little guilt!”

I snapped my mouth shut. *Ah, I get the picture. That’s right, this guy is one of them—one of the immortal demons.* His long lifespan gave him a funny preoccupation with reputation,

agreements, and whatnot. Stubborn about his own self-enforced rules.

“My name is Immortal Demon King Badigadi! If you want to fight next to me, you need to defeat me first!”

That’s right. This was *the* Immortal Demon King Badigadi. He was a Demon King who bestowed wisdom. His sister, Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe, bestowed power. She could only be forced to submit by someone stronger than her. In contrast, it was said Badigadi would only capitulate to someone who showed they had a little cunning.

“Fine, all right. I’ll take you on.”

“A contest of wits? Fwahaha! What nonsense are you going on about? What would be the purpose of such a contest?”

“What?”

Well, crap. If it was a fistfight he was after, I had no chance. *Should I bring someone else to fight for me?*

“Not much glory to be found in beatin’ down a puny guy like me though, yeah? Or do ya really think that’d add to your honor as a Demon King?”

Badigadi shook his head. “Of course not! It’s a Demon King’s duty to give a fighting chance to potential heroes.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Okay, then what kinda contest are you looking for?”

The man pulled over another cask of ale. “This,” he said. “From the looks of you, I’d bet you’re quite the heavy drinker!”

“I enjoy a drop.”

A drinking contest, then. I wasn’t all that good at holding my liquor. I liked it more than Talhand, yes, but not enough to brag about.

Badigadi had about ten empty casks strewn about around him. *Taking that into account, maybe I can…* Nah, I couldn’t get my hopes

up. This man was an immortal demon. No matter how good my advantage here might seem, I'd bet the guy had an unlimited capacity to drink. He was like a bottomless pit. I wasn't gonna win.

"Well?" Badigadi goaded me. "Have you chickened out? Or are you the type who only agrees to a challenge if he's sure he can win?"

"Nah, more like I don't bother with challenges I *know* I'm not gonna win," I said, correcting him.

"Rudeus Greyrat was different. He didn't flinch at a fight. He let out a loud laugh and suddenly slung an Emperor-tier spell at me. Of course, I still beat him! Fwahahaha!"

"I wouldn't want you paintin' Boss and me with the same brush anyhow. Unlike him, I wasn't handed any talents."

"Hmph. What's all that about not taking on a challenge you can't win and having no talent? You think Rudeus Greyrat was that confident at the time? That he threw himself into every single battle feeling he'd be protected by his own talents?"

I thought back to our time in the Teleportation Labyrinth. Boss'd had more confidence than me, to be sure, but he'd quaked with anxiety a fair few times. The slipup he made at the end nearly destroyed him completely. Roxy had forced him back to his feet, but it was close. He had improved as time went on, but he still carried Paul's death with him like a weight.

I was willing to bet he had no illusions of being able to win when he faced Orsted, either. Rudeus barely held his own against that hydra, but that Orsted fella could have trounced that monster one-handed.

"You must realize it too, eh? There are some battles you can't win just by manipulating things from the safety of the shadows. Sometimes you gotta put your life on the line, to gamble on your chance at victory."

I said nothing in response.

“I know it,” said Badigadi. “There was a time when I didn’t, which is why I ended up losing everything. So, I learned. I’ve honed my body, chugged all kinds of alcohol, and made battalions of friends! Fwahahaha! I wish I could show you the puny nobody I used to be!”

I only knew what this soapboxing Demon King was like based on the little bit the Man-God told me. Still, lack of intel aside, there was one thing I was certain of: for a Demon King, a contract was absolute. This contest wasn’t *impossible*. It was just a drinking competition. If I could nab a win out of this, I knew he would honor his promise. He’d become the Man-God’s stooge and my puppet. Immortal Demon King Badigadi, the guy who’d faced and bested a Dragon God way back in historical times, would be at the beck and call of me: Geese Nukadia, the Man-God’s little yes-man, a guy who picked the bones off of other people’s lives to get by.

“Fine,” I said.

If it were a battle of fists, I wouldn’t have a prayer. As long as he wasn’t looking for physical combat, though, then it wasn’t impossible.

I nodded to myself. “You got a fight. Hope you’re up for gettin’ crushed, Demon King.”

“Fwahaha! That’s the spirit! Come then, show me what you’ve got!”

“You’d better not forget your promise,” I warned him.

“The rest of you! Bring us more ale!”

With the terms of our contest set, everyone around us erupted with excitement.

“All right, monkey-face! Show us what you’ve got!”

“Yeah, you’ve got some spirit for an outsider.”

“This fella’ll out-monkey you! Watch yourself!”

Tugged along by the men around us, I found myself pushed into a chair. I scanned the area and my eyes landed on a heap of unconscious bodies—poor idiots who'd challenged Badigadi only to fail spectacularly. There were five of them piled there, but I suspected there were many more besides those currently sleeping it off in a heap. *That means the man's gotta be pretty tanked, but… Jeez, do I really have a chance of winnin' this?*

"Go on then, have your first cup."

I was handed a tankard—a wooden cup the size of an enormous fist, into which they poured a translucent, golden ale, filling the tankard to the brim.

"Bottoms up!"

"Yeah, knock 'em back!"

I managed to guzzle down the first drink without any issues. *Mm, yeah, this ale actually goes down pretty easily.* I could down this stuff almost endlessly. Although, judging by the bodies on the floor, I wasn't the only one who'd been convinced of that.

"Kehehe, they were fools, all of them—thinking they could challenge an Immortal Demon King like me to a drinking contest," said Badigadi.

"Has anyone ever beaten you at this before?"

"Yes!"

Someone handed me my second tankard. We knocked our overfilled tankards together and then drained them dry.

"Pwah!" I exhaled once I'd finished swallowing it all. "You gonna tell me the name of this fella?"

"That should be obvious! It was the Demon World's Great Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu!"

"Gimme a break. She don't count."

"Fwahahahaha! A win is a win, and a loss is a loss!"

Kishirika Kishirisu was Badigadi's fiancée. During the Second Great Human-Demon War, the two were in a master-servant relationship. It was a good bet Badigadi had purposefully lost to her as a show of deference.

"You mean to tell me you lost in a fair fight?" I asked, skeptical.

"Yup. You have just as much chance! It'd make a good story for the last surviving Nukadia to beat me."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why do you know that?"

"Fwahaha! I know the people of my region. I know which clans have recently been snuffed out!"

I finished my fourth tankard. It was a delicious ale. Went down smooth.

"Geese Nukadia," Badigadi went on, "what do you consider to be a 'fair fight,' hm?"

"That's a weird question. I'd say it's exactly the way you put it yourself before. No losing on purpose, no holding back, and continuing until one side's the clear victor. Right?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

One of the men presented me with my fifth tankard. I took it in hand. *I can still do this. All is good,* I told myself.

"But victory is a vague concept. Wouldn't you agree?"

I nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I would. There are a lotta losers out there who act like they've won something."

"Fwahaha! See, you do get it!"

Next came my sixth tankard. I felt the edges of my vision begin to blur, but I was still in the game. I could knock more back. The alcohol hadn't yet inebriated me. *That's right, all good.*

"Think for a moment. What's victory mean to you?" Badigadi asked.

"Victory?"

This ain't good. This ale's dangerous. It was delicious enough to chug it down without thinking. Proof-wise, this stuff was more potent than Asura's wine. It was on par with Ranoa's hard liquor or the ale the dwarves served. It was hard to notice thanks to the flavor, but this was a drink for people who wanted to get hammered ASAP. This wasn't the kinda stuff you wanted to keep knocking back like this.

Calm it down a bit, I told myself. *You gotta slow down your pace or you're gonna lose this.* I couldn't afford to be defeated here. Win or lose, I couldn't let things end here.

"Yep, you got it. Think about it long and hard."

Think? Think about it… Think about what? Oh, victory. Yes, victory… What's victory anyway? What's it mean to me? What've I gotta do to win? Drink Badigadi into a stupor? Nah. That ain't what I'm after. There's gotta be something else—some other reason why we're having this contest.

"Here ya go, number eight."

I couldn't even remember the seventh one. Something was coming into focus for me—this *was* a battle of wits to him. It was a roundabout method, sure, but he was gonna get me drunk, then challenge me to scrape myself together and talk him into something. The important thing wasn't trying to out-drink him. He wanted me to know that the deeper game was to get him to admit defeat.

I realized he'd been sprinkling hints at ways to achieve victory throughout our conversation. This was a game. A game in which I had to follow the hints, find the appropriate words, and guess correctly.

Pfft, as if I can even remember a word that's come outta him. You tryin' to mess with me, makin' me guzzle down this strong ale only to ask questions that require me to think?

"You tryin' to keep me dancin' for your entertainment? That it? Huh?" I scowled at him.

“Fwahaha! The palms of my hands are quite large, so they should be easy to dance on!”

“Who d’ya think you’re talkin’ to, huh? The one who’ll be dancin’ before this is through is you! On the palm of *my* hand!”

The ninth tankard went down the hatch.

“Well said! But goodness, it looks like your body is starting to sway before mine!”

“Oh, shut it!” I snapped at him.

I accepted the tenth cup with a hand that shook uncontrollably. I knew that if I swallowed all of this down, I was definitely gonna vomit after. That didn’t stop me. I had no choice but to do it. It wasn’t like I had a specific reason, really. I just knew that if I gave up, I wasn’t gonna be able to beat Rudeus.

“Urp…”

Unable to withstand all the alcohol, my stomach began to contract. My head felt like it was spinning round and round. I clenched my jaw, trying desperately to hold it in, but something sour crawled up my throat and began filling my mouth. I kept my lips clamped shut, but it rushed into my nose instead. A sickening chill ran through me.

“Bleeeegh!”

I retched. What came out of me had no form—it was all fluid, stomach acid mixed with ale, which created a disgusting puddle on the floor. An acrid odor filled the room. The men around us scrunched their faces in disgust even as they broke out into applause, fawning over the Demon King and his victory.

“Fwahaha! That’s the end of our match then!”

I was down on all fours on the floor, saliva dripping down my chin as I stared at the sick pooling beneath me. Everything felt awful. My whole body, my heart—all of it. I had lost, utterly and completely. I was a loser.

I forced my head up, where I could see the six-armed Demon King. He stood, still looking as dignified as ever even as he approached, drink in hand. He wore a triumphant look on his face.

I averted my eyes. I couldn't believe he'd defeated me. Sure, I knew there was no avenue of victory from the outside, but somewhere deep down, I knew there had to be some way to win. That if we were just doing a drinking contest, I had a chance. *But in reality, I…*

Suddenly, it dawned on me.

"Hm?"

I returned to my seat and silently took my tankard in hand, holding it up. It was the eleventh drink someone had poured for me at some point.

"Who made a rule that if ya vomit ya lose, huh?" I spoke.

Badigadi's face went blank for a moment. He was completely taken aback. He soon grinned and plonked himself down. "Nobody did!" he admitted gleefully.

Oh, *hell* yeah. Time for round two.

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I forgot how many tankards I'd downed and how many times I'd vomited all that ale back up again. Midway through, I started retching between each tankard I drank. I even threw up as I drank a few times. My body was past its limit. I knew that. My consciousness was going in and out, my vision blurry, my memories disjointed. I couldn't even speak, merely groaning. I became a machine, robotically grabbing a newly filled tankard only to immediately down it. It was some kinda miracle that I hadn't passed out yet.

"Ooh… Urgh…"

"Fwahaha! Fwahaha! Fwahaha! Fwahahahaha!"

Through the haze of my drunken stupor, Badigadi's hearty laughter faded in and out. I stopped hearing the crowd and their cheering and jeering a while back. I felt like I was in the middle of a dream.

Hold up. When did Badigadi fall over sideways? Nah, it's me that's fallen over, huh? Crap…

"If you keep this up, milord, he's going to die."

"Hm. I hadn't pegged him for the type to go this far," Badigadi said thoughtfully.

"What shall we do with him?"

"Use Detoxification magic on him and lay him down over there."

"What about your match?"

“Fwahaha! For a coward like him to put his life on the line—that’s heroic! I have no choice but to admit defeat! Being a hero doesn’t necessarily mean being physically strong, does it? Fwahahaha!”

I managed to make out that short exchange before my consciousness sank into the hungry dark.

Badigadi

A PERFECT OPPORTUNITY! Allow me to talk about the past a little. I’m gonna tell you about a guy who thought he was clever. *Wrongly*. Everyone around him was a complete moron, so he’d been misled. His companions, his older sister—whose power was nothing in comparison to his own, by the way—and even the monarch he and his peers were supposed to love and respect. Everyone around him lacked any sense. It was only natural that he assumed he had wits.

You see, everyone in his tribe was—as a rule—an idiot. What made him different was that he tried to expand his intelligence. He understood the logic behind certain things, could correctly predict what people were thinking, and was skilled at uncovering the solutions to problems.

The man’s father called him the prodigy of prodigies, born only once in ten thousand years. He was even given the epithet Demon King of Wisdom. No wonder he thought he was clever, hm?

What’s that? You would argue that if he really was more clever than everyone he knew, then he wasn’t wrong? Fwahahaha! Now that’s an assumption!

Think about it for a moment: If one man in a sea of fools is just a little smarter than the rest of them, can you really say he’s clever? No, you can’t! The fact he didn’t see it himself proves he wasn’t such a genius!

We're getting off track. I'm telling a story, here!

At the time, humans and demons were locked in a conflict that'd later be called the Second Great Human-Demon War. It was little more than a skirmish when compared to the later Laplace War.

Our long lifespans make us demons a patient lot, so our invasions are slow-paced. We are laid-back even when it comes to losing the pivotal battles in a war, thereby giving the humans the time to recover and rally against us once more. Winning a battle is less important than winning the overall war.

Our dipshit hero joined the Demon King army, where he was given the position of tactical adviser. He saw how his people were engaging in the war and was dismayed. Things couldn't continue like this. If they really wanted to win, they needed to commit to a more aggressive offense—to take key locations in enemy territory.

What do you know? No one wanted to listen to him. They were all idiots, after all, unable to understand the logic of war! Fwahahaha!

Anyway, one day—yes, I'm being vague, but it wasn't a special day otherwise. It was out of the blue, really. Or was it? Maybe something had happened to precipitate the event, but our protagonist wasn't bright enough to figure out the cause.

Anyway!

One day, the man started having a recurring dream. A person appeared in it, someone whose gender was indiscernible, whose very appearance was as indistinct as a shadow. Barely a wisp of a dream. This person called themselves the Man-God. Quite literally, the god of the humans.

The man immediately asked why the god had come to him. Was it to kill him?

The god said, "I'm a god, you realize. Everyone who lives in the world is like a child to me. I would never dream of killing you. In fact, seeing how hard you've been working, I'd like to help you out."

So, a lunatic.

The man was naturally suspicious of this god, but the god still offered him a small word of advice before disappearing. Inconsequential, easy-to-follow advice: he said to send some troops —even a few would be fine—to the Galgau Ruins.

Now, our protagonist was serious to a fault. He knew there was a Demon King already situated at the ruins with their troops. He didn't see much need to send extra troops since it hardly seemed like a vulnerable position, but he nonetheless followed the advice given and deployed some of his troops there.

When they arrived, it was a shocking sight. The Galgau Ruins had already turned into a battlefield. The demons found themselves outnumbered, but the humans hadn't expected the man to arrive with reinforcements. He hadn't brought many with him, but they were just enough to topple the enemy's formation. The man wound up saving the Demon King army's most central Demon King. The victory bolstered his influence.

It was a dream from there.

The man manipulated the Demon King army from behind the scenes with his cleverness. He assumed control of the humans' territories at an alarming speed. He also curried favor with the beastfolk, who were considered a subset of demons at the time, and convinced them to join hands with the demons. Those weren't the only allies he won over, though. The man even managed to bring the sea people into the fold. Together, their armies steadily gained territory. It was only a matter of time until the humans were wiped out completely. The man was grateful to the god. Thanks to that god, our protagonist would soon be able to avenge his great and noble father.

It never happened.

I remember it like it just happened moments ago.

The strategy our protagonist had come up with was flawless. There hadn't been a single hole in it, reflecting back. Fwahaha! I'm exaggerating a little, my memory isn't perfect. One thing still escapes me. What I can tell you is this: the man's plan was perfect and if it'd

succeeded, the man could have established a bridgehead to Asura Kingdom. The humans would have nowhere left to run. Victory was certain. That was how perfect it was.

Then, one crucial aspect failed.

It was strange. His army was superior in raw numbers and strength. In fact, he and his troops had a better grasp of how crucial this battle was. The humans were oblivious. That was precisely why the fortress the demons attempted to invade had so few people guarding it. These facts assured the man he couldn't lose.

And yet, he did.

It was a massacre. People throw that word around, but I mean it. It wasn't clean, it wasn't neat, they all died, and every death was the nasty kind. There wasn't a single survivor.

The man was horrified when saw the gory aftermath. His men numbered over ten thousand, but they had all been butchered. He couldn't begin to fathom *how* the slaughter had happened. The only thing clear was that it seemed to be almost entirely the work of one single human. It was the same brutal technique, over and over again.

The man realized a tremendous monster had been born among the humans—or from their perspective, a hero, I guess. During the First Great Human-Demon War, a similar hero had appeared and expelled the demons with overwhelming might. Our foolish protagonist had heard the story, which was how he recognized the culprit this time was similar.

That was the turning point. After that, no matter what the man did, nothing went right. This hero would interfere and impede every last plan he made. It was all that hero's fault.

Hm? You ask how he knew? No, no, it's explained easily enough. Not all of those troops were killed in every battle, so he was able to gather information from the survivors. He discovered even the humans weren't quite sure what this hero of theirs was. He was a

man clad in golden armor who appeared suddenly in battle to lead the humans to victory. That was the only intel they had.

People called the man “Golden Knight Aldebaran.”

Aldebaran commanded such overpowering might that he could completely turn the tide of battle, giving the humans momentum.

It was ridiculous. No matter how much our guy racked his intelligence, no matter how complex and well thought-out his plan, he was always overcome by the human hero’s unsurpassable strength.

People called it the Second Great Human-Demon War, but it wasn’t an overstatement to say the war really was just between the demons and the man Aldebaran. Midway through the whole conflict, the man stopped bothering with his armor at all. He still managed to overpower us.

The demons couldn’t win against Aldebaran. Our protagonist lost every major battle after that. The human army drove his forces back until they were routed to the demons’ last bastion of defense, Kishirisu Castle.

Back then, our demon hero had a strong sense of duty. He was convinced it was entirely his fault that they were in the current mess. They had lost so many brave Demon Kings. His sister, one of the strongest of all the Demon Kings, was even rendered powerless in the course of all of this. They had lost all of the territory they had conquered in the course of the war. All of that was *his* fault. Oh, how presumptuous he had been.

That wasn’t true in hindsight. There was no need for him to feel responsible for losing to such a powerful adversary. What he should have done was cut his losses and run like the rest of the Demon Kings, hunkering down in his region to eke out a quiet life.

Guilt didn’t change much. The war was over, and the demon army fell to pieces. It was only a matter of time before the humans took all of the demons’ territory from them.

It was then that a woman that our protagonist had always thought the most foolish of all said to him, “This isn’t your fault. I will take care of the rest—stop troubling yourself.”

She was the monarch he and the others were supposed to love and respect—an uninhibited free spirit who lived exactly the way she wanted. The man was openly hostile to her. Fwaha! But deep down, you see, he was madly in love. Why had this Demon King of Wisdom pushed himself past his limits as a tactical advisor? Love, of course! To make this woman—his beloved—happy.

It was only at the end of it all that he realized this truth. That was when he prayed to the god.

Please, help this woman. Help us demonfolk. I’ll do anything in return, I swear.

That very night, after he said that prayer, the unsettling being appeared in his dreams once more. He still couldn’t tell whether the being was male or female, nor could he discern any of their features. But the god grinned at him and waved a hand, almost like an old friend flagging him down on the side of the road.

“Heya,” said the god.

The man was naturally wary. Why had this god—a human god—arrived to answer the prayers of a demon like him?

As if to answer his doubts, the god said, “Aldebaran is a terrible Fighting God, you see. I’m at as much of a loss about this as you. At the rate things are going, your beloved queen and the rest of the demons will meet a grim fate.”

There was something odd about that in hindsight. Why would a human god be troubled by something as trivial as the extinction of the demon race? But the man was too desperate to listen to his better judgment. He was grasping at straws for anything to turn this all around.

“What should I do?” he asked.

The Man-God lips curled into a smarmy, conniving smile. “Follow my exact instructions.”

So, the man set off on a journey. It may be hard to believe now, but he was frail at the time, all skin and bones. He was an immortal demon, so he walked without rest or sleep. He weaved his way right through the human army, passed through over ten forests, crossed over five rivers, and climbed over three whole mountains. Then, finally, he delved into the very depths of a labyrinth that no longer exists. That was where he found it: a single, purple-colored vial. It had been ordinary medicine once, but the thick mana permeating the labyrinth had altered it.

“That is special Anti-Demon Eye elixir. If you drink that, no demon eye will be able to see you.”

Perhaps this had been something originally intended to fall into the hands of another of the human’s heroes—it could have created a second on the level of Aldebaran. This elixir would have created a weakness in the most powerful leader of the demons, Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu.

This elixir’s effects would continue until their death. Knowing that, the man gulped it all down. Then he began running again. He passed through endlessly deep valleys, a blizzarding meadow, and at the end, he climbed the world’s largest mountain.

It was there that he found the second thing he was looking for: a suit of golden armor. It glittered from head to toe, but it didn’t look ridiculous. No, this armor was sinister, with the power to bewitch all who gazed upon it. This fearsome armor had been hidden within such a steep mountain, sealed away far out of sight.

“Whoever dons this armor will have invincible power,” the god had told him.

It bears repeating: the man was an idiot. He didn’t stop to think why this armor had been sealed away—why someone had hid it here. It was the height of arrogance to call himself the Demon King of Wisdom. Demon King of Stupidity would have fit him much better.

The man followed the Man-God's instructions and released the seal binding the armor. The seal was rather complex, but appropriately for a self-proclaimed Demon King of Wisdom, removing wasn't all that difficult. Once he'd removed it, he donned the armor…and lost control.

The armor was indeed powerful. It was imbued with such a surplus of mana that it had developed a consciousness of its own. Not that the man noticed this at first. He was too drunk on the power that poured out of the armor and into him. He was convinced that with this, he would be able to take Aldebaran down.

I'll butcher that Aldebaran and then slaughter the rest, he thought.

If it's not obvious, he was immediately thrown out of his right mind. The man was normally useless when it came to battle, but he found himself driven by a thirst for it. He moved as swiftly as the wind. He leapt down from the behemoth of a mountain, crossed the valley, the blizzarding meadow, three more mountains, five rivers, and ten forests. He routed the enemy army and returned at last to his beloved's side.

I made it, he thought. The woman he adored was still alive. She had fought, she was beaten to the cusp of death, but she was alive.

Who was it she'd fought against? Hm, this may be a bit difficult to explain, but it was not actually Aldebaran who stood opposing her. In a certain sense, the opponent was the same as Aldebaran, but not exactly. You see, the human known as Aldebaran—the golden knight who appeared in the initial battle that changed everything—was already dead by this point.

The enemy who stood against them was Dragon God Laplace. Demonic Dragon God Laplace, if you want his full title. Our protagonist knew of him.

Dragon God Laplace lived a secluded life in the distant mountains, only occasionally descending to the village below to

teach people martial arts. He was a mild-mannered individual whom the immortal demons had long warned their children and their children's children not to contradict. That was really all the man knew of Laplace.

This Laplace was trying to kill the woman our protagonist loved, for some reason. Had the man been in his right mind, he might have paused to consider what motivated the Dragon God—at least demanded an explanation. He could have used his intellect to talk Laplace down, to avoid combat completely.

Alas, the man's bloodlust overcame him. When he saw his beloved was wounded, fury seized him. The man let out a roar of a kind that had never escaped his throat before or since, then flung himself at Laplace.

The Dragon God was taken aback. Of course he was. His opponent wore the armor he was sure no one would ever find. Worse, no demon eye could perceive him. The man's title as Demonic Dragon God was not simply for show, however. He was the lone surviving king of the ancient dragon race—a person whom the man's own people dared not to oppose.

If the man had faced Laplace with his regular strength, their battle would not have even lasted a few seconds. In fact, with the first attack, the Dragon God had managed to chop off the man's arms and behead him as well. Had the man not been wearing that suit of armor, it would have ended there. Had the man not been an immortal demon, it would have all been over in that exact moment. Those are mere hypotheticals, because the man *was* wearing the suit of armor. He *was* an immortal demon.

New limbs sprang forth from what remained of the man's body and the armor automatically repaired itself. It forced the man's body to move—to fight—even as his consciousness was half gone.

It was a fierce battle.

If Laplace had miscalculated anything, it was that he never imagined someone besides his chosen donning the armor he had,

himself, created.

The man had no way of fighting, but the armor did. It had trained with all sorts of weapons, had imitated many different martial arts, could analyze the flow of battle. It possessed a repertoire of over a thousand secret techniques and was able to select whichever was most optimal for the situation. Among its secret techniques were, of course, some that the Demonic Dragon God had spent many long years creating himself.

Ironic, right?

I have no idea what Laplace must have been thinking to develop this technique, but he'd come up with one that was incredibly fatal to himself. When used against him, it split Laplace in half.

The man had defeated the most powerful opponent in the world and protected the woman he loved. Wonderful, no? What a happy ending! Fwahahaha!

Well…actually, the story continued. But let a man dream a little.

Why wasn't it over? Because the man wasn't done after he'd bested Laplace. The armor had overtaken his consciousness, transforming him into a monster controlled entirely by his own bloodlust.

By the time the man came to once more, he had already driven his sword through the very heart of his beloved. He had no idea why his consciousness had returned. Perhaps the woman had used the last of her strength to return him to his senses, or perhaps the irrevocable act of plunging his weapon through her had produced such shock that he'd come back on his own.

Regardless of the *how*, it was too late. The man had killed his beloved with his own two hands.

"Ah… Ah…" He whimpered, his voice not even forming coherent words.

All he had ever wanted was to protect this woman.

“Fwa…haha…” The woman was different. She laughed, in spite of the circumstances—in spite of being betrayed by someone she trusted—she laughed. “You haven’t changed… Still the same old puckered face… Such a boring man you are… Laugh.”

“Huh?”

“No matter what’s happening…just laugh.”

“But I… You…”

“I don’t mind,” she assured him. “You are too serious for your own good… Too sour faced. Always holing up in your room…never drinking any ale…never sleeping…! What’s so fun…about that? Belt out some laughter…sleep with some women.”

“Women?” He shook his head. “But I…I am in love with you!”

“Fwahaha…what are you saying? Then you should…try being more cheerful… Do that and…I’ll marry you.”

“Y-yes. I’ll do my best.”

“All right…then in our next lives, I’ll…be your betrothed. Fwahaha… Fwaha…” The woman laughed right up to the very end. Yes, she let out a hearty cackle—one that echoed around the two of them. “Fwahahaha! Fwaha, fwaha, fwahahahaha!”

Light wrapped around the two as their lives faded from the world.

Hm? Skeptical about the light? A little too pretty? Hardly! That rotten Laplace had made his body explode. That vindictive ass had thought about what to do if he were killed. He’d prepared a special art to use as he lay at death’s door, one that would split the smallest particles of his body upon his death—the Laplace factor—which would spread out across all the matter in the world, biding its time. Unfortunately for him, the Man-God had come up with a scheme to combat this. The secret technique the armor had deployed against him rendered his art incomplete. When his body was split, half of the mana intended to perform this technique was missing. It spun out of

control, exploding—a terrible, but not totalizing, destruction. The immortal Laplace died.

Okay, okay, it was a little more complicated than that. He was split in half—into the Demon God and Technique God respectively. But the being that called himself Demonic Dragon God Laplace was no more. Fragments of him lived, but the whole being as he'd existed was dead.

As for our protagonist—even though he'd died, he was still an immortal demon. It took some years for him to fully recover, but he did. Until then, however, he remained unconscious, lost in a fleeting dreamworld.

It was there that he met the Man-God again.

"Hehe… Ahahahaha!" The Man-God snickered at him mockingly. "Demon King of Wisdom? How ridiculous! You danced in the palm of my hand and killed the woman you claimed to love! You're nothing but an empty-headed puppet!"

The Man-God knew from the start. He knew that when the man retrieved that armor, that he would fight Laplace, lose consciousness, and kill his beloved. He'd coaxed our protagonist into trusting him. He'd manipulated him. All knowing from the very first how it would end.

"Ah, this is always so enjoyable, no matter how many times I do it. It's the best feeling in the world…getting to see the idiotic look on your face right now. I wanted this all along!"

The Man-God humiliated the man.

"Well, see ya. I don't think I'll use you again, but I wish you a long life all the same, O Demon King of Stupidity."

That was the last thing the Man-God said before he disappeared.

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“And now you want me, a ‘Demon King of Stupidity,’ to lend you a hand?” he demanded, now that he was back in that empty dream world.

“Yep. Well, see, you’re an immortal demon unlike the rest of ’em. Your lady love is still alive and you’re enjoying your life right now, no? You don’t hold a grudge, do you?”

“You have a point. But this time, the story might be different. Maybe our protagonist and his lady love just…disappear. Forever.”

“No, c’mon, that won’t happen. I’m in a bind. I wouldn’t screw you over in a situation like that. I’ll even apologize… Just lend me your power, would you? See how sincere I am?” The Man-God—the being that was neither man nor woman, not even corporeal enough to have distinguishing features—bowed his head.

“Hm.”

The gesture was casual, carrying very little sincerity at all despite the Man-God’s insistence. But it was most definitely an apology. The Man-God hardly seemed the type to say sorry, given that he only cared about degrading people. It’d be expected for him to brag about his exploits, certainly, but apologizing? Out of character. And yet here he was, bowing.

“What do you plan on doing if I don’t lend you my strength?” asked the man.

“Then I’ll die. Not immediately, but in the distant future.”

The man contemplated. Yes, the Man-God had deceived him. Following the Man-God’s advice had caused their invasion of the humans to proceed at a faster pace, awakening the sleeping lion among them. Later, the armor possessed the man and caused him to kill the woman he loved more than anything in the world. The Man-God had toyed with his devotion, making a mockery of him. He knew the Man-God must have known what would happen—must have foreseen the look of despair on the man’s face, the pathetic

sight of him sobbing as he lost it all. He laughed as if all of this were a game to him.

He should have resented the Man-God until the end of his days.

But the proud Demon King army was no more. The man was no longer a tactical adviser. He was nothing more than a lone Demon King.

“I *did* help you with that man, if you’ll remember.”

“Yes, I am grateful for that,” our protagonist admitted.

“See?”

That advice had not been given to Badi directly, but rather fed to him through someone else. A stranger had offered him two bits of information, both of which led in a promising direction. It was only afterward that the man thought to ask the stranger how they’d gotten the information. They answered, “This god I saw in a dream told me to inform you.” The man’s expression had turned bitter upon hearing that.

Regardless, the man was grateful. That advice had allowed him to help both a tribe of demons who had once resided in his region and the hero they idolized. The latter had looked so happy when he was reunited with them. The man would not soon forget the look on his face.

“So… C’mon, please,” the Man-God entreated, bowing his head again.

“Hmm.”

The man continued to consider the issue. Even though the Man-God had done him some small service, it could not erase the unforgivable sins he’d committed. On the other hand, was there anything in the world that was entirely beyond redemption? Perhaps for other people, but he was an immortal demon. He hadn’t known it at the time, but the woman he loved had a fate strong enough that

death couldn't hold her back. The two of them had survived that miserable episode.

It should be said that, had the man been younger, he would have dismissed the Man-God's request immediately. If anything, he would have aligned himself on the opposing side, hoping to get revenge for all the pain and humiliation he'd once suffered.

He'd changed, however.

The Demon King of Wisdom—conceited oaf that he was—was dead. The man had trained his body, laughed loudly, slept with women, got hammered, and slept with his body sprawled out and taking as much space as possible no matter who it inconvenienced. He had become someone truly deserving of the woman he loved.

He was no Demon King of Wisdom. He was not so weak and pathetic he needed to rely on a god's advice to protect his beloved. He was now the Immortal Demon King Badigadi, master of Rikarisu—the town where the remnants of Kishirika's old castle jutted up toward the sky—and king of the Biegoya Region. He was not someone who held grudges over trifles. He was broadminded and magnanimous.

A puny demon with no strength whatsoever had challenged him, and he had admitted defeat. On top of that, his sworn enemy had come to him to offer an apology as well. He had no choice.

"Fwahaha! Very well! If you are that insistent, then I suppose I will help you!"

"You mean it? Ugh, that's a relief!"

With that, Badigadi became one of the Man-God's disciples.

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"So then, who is our enemy?" Badigadi asked.

"Our enemy is the Dragon God Orsted."

“Aha.”

The Man-God added, “But the one we’ve really got to defeat is his underling, Rudeus Greyrat.”

“The boy with the ridiculous mana pool?”

Badigadi had spent only one short year with Rudeus. Kishirika had told him of the boy whose mana pool surpassed even that of the Demon God Laplace, and that had garnered his interest. He was keen on meeting Laplace once his reincarnation had arrived. In the end, the boy hadn’t been Laplace; he was simply possessed of incredible magical power. It was a curiosity, but the boy was otherwise unremarkable.

“Fwahahaha! So that boy’s become the Dragon God’s underling, has he? What could have happened to make him that stony man’s errand boy? How amusing!”

The Man-God shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I’ve got no idea.”

“Hmph. So you say. I’ll bet you deceived the boy and turned him into a vengeful demon, didn’t you?”

“Well, it’d be kind of a pain to explain it all, but… Yeah, guess you’re not wrong.”

“Fwhahaha! What goes around comes around, then!” The man let out a hearty laughter, mocking the god the same way the god had once mocked him.

The Man-God looked particularly annoyed by the ridicule. Still, he had no choice but to swallow his displeasure. Badi had agreed to become his pawn, so he had what he wanted.

“No matter,” said the Man-God. “Geese is the one coming up with the specifics. You just need to cooperate with my other disciples and lure Rudeus into a trap.”

“Yeah? You’re not gonna fight him fair and square?”

“It’s better to win without a head-on confrontation if you can help it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

If he'd been the same man who'd called himself the Demon King of Wisdom, then he likely would have nodded without a moment's hesitation. However, he was now the Demon King of Stupidity—the Immortal Demon King Badigadi. He was the type to let his opponent attack first, withstand the blow, then return it with a counter of his own to take them down. Rudeus would have called him something of a pro wrestler.

"I don't like it," said the man.

"Knowing how you are now, I figured you'd say that. You understand better than anyone though, don't you? That if you try to take on the Dragon God in a fair fight, you have no chance of beating him."

"No chance whatsoever, yup."

The Man-God went on, "That's precisely why I'd like you to head to a certain location for me and retrieve something."

"I assume you don't want me to weave through a human army, pass through more than ten forests, cross more than five rivers, climb up more than three mountains, pass over a valley of unknown depths, through a blizzarding meadow, and scale the world's tallest mountain…do you?"

"No, nothing like that. You just need to cross one ocean. That's all." After saying that, the Man-God smiled. "Of course, what I am asking you to retrieve is something you're quite familiar with already."

Badigadi knew instantly what it was that rested in the depths of the ocean. Something he should have detested with the whole of his being. But if they were going to take on the Dragon God, never mind harbor any hope of defeating him, then it would be absolutely necessary.

"Hmm… Fine. I shall do it!" Badigadi spent only a moment waffling about the matter before agreeing.

He was the Immortal Demon King Badigadi, after all—Kishirika Kishirisu's fiancé. He wasn't so small-minded he would sweat the

details. He had agreed to serve under Geese if he could beat him in a drinking contest. He'd made a pact and gotten his apology, so it was fine.

To a Demon King, a contract was absolute. Perhaps that seemed superficial in light of how the Man-God was still a liar, but the fact was that he *had* agreed to this. If the Man-God wanted him to retrieve that detestable thing, bring it back, and use it to defeat the Man-God's enemies, then there was nothing to hesitate about.

"And you have no other advice for me?" The man asked.

"Unfortunately, my vision counts as a kind of demon eye. I cannot see your future since you drank the Anti-Demon Eye elixir."

"Aha, I see then! Good news for me! After all, life would be boring if you could see exactly where it ends! Fwahahaha!"

Badigadi was boisterous and cheerful. The heartier his laughter, the more the Man-God's face puckered with displeasure.

"I may not be able to see your future," the Man-God said, "but I can see another man's future. He's not as clever as you, perhaps, but clever enough, and he can fight even though he's not physically strong. Follow his instructions."

"Fwahahaha, you mean that scrawny man with the monkey face? Very well! I'll be his right hand man for you!"

"Excellent. So, Demon King of Wisdom Badigadi—"

"No," the man corrected, "I am that man no longer. I am the Demon King of Stupidity—the Immortal Demon King Badigadi!"

"In that case, Immortal Demon King Badigadi, I entrust this to you."

The man nodded vigorously. "Yes, you can leave it all to me! Fwaha! Fwahaha! Fwahahahahahahaha!"

Their business was concluded. With his own laughter ringing in his ears, Badigadi's vision bleached to white.

"Fwahahahaha!"

He watched the disgusted face of the Man-God with great pleasure, and even as his consciousness faded, his laughter did not.

About the Author
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website Let's Be Novelists, they created the web novel Mushoku Tensei. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

"It's been quite a while since I was in first place," said the author.

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